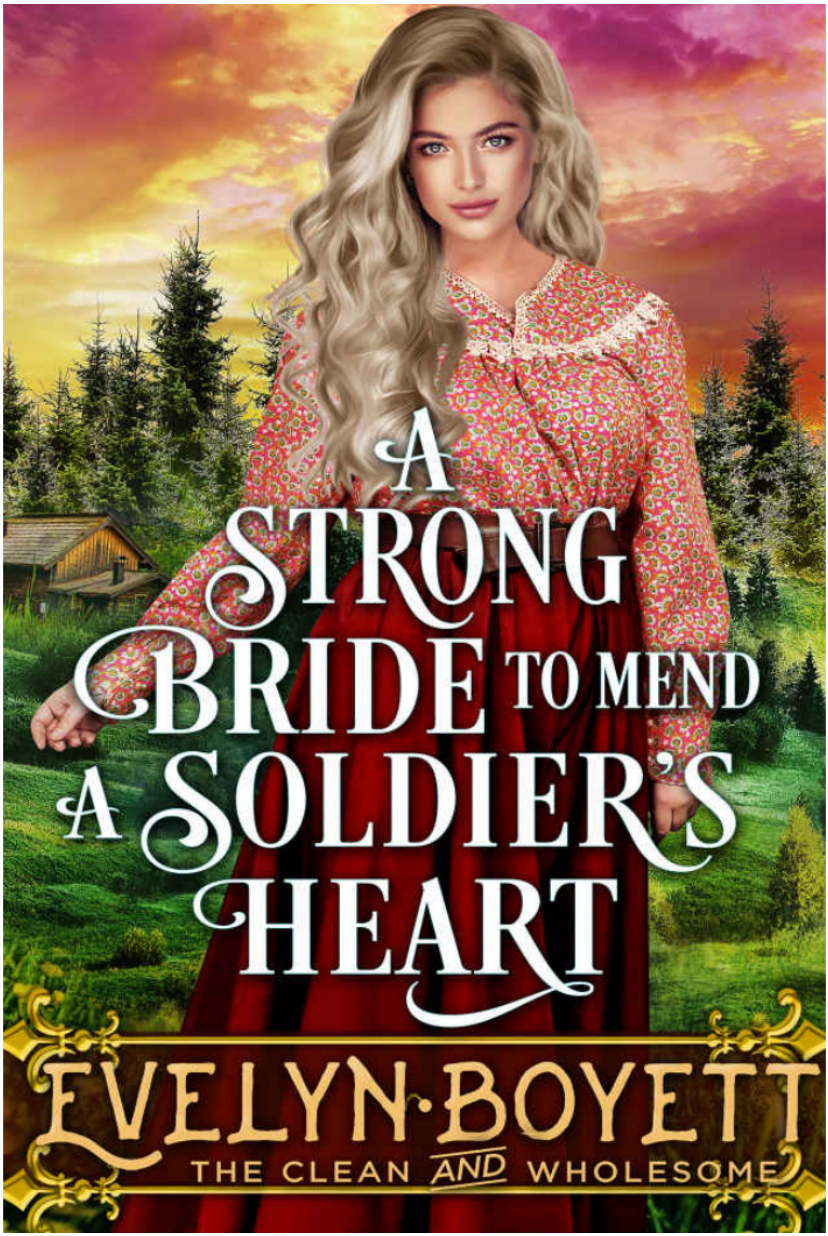

A STRONG BRIDE TO MEND A SOLDIER'S HEART
EVELYN BOYETT
THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

A Strong Bride to Mend a Soldier's Heart

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Evelyn Boyett

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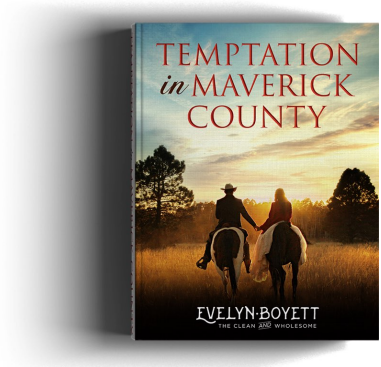
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1

"Happy birthday," Edgar said, handing her a small box.

"What is this?" Maude gasped.

"I believe it's what they call a birthday present."

Maude laughed and took the box from him, holding it as gently as she'd hold an egg. She looked at him, a surprised but grateful expression on her face.

Edgar knew it wasn't often her birthday was acknowledged, and it always made him feel bad for her. This year, Maude's parents had traveled north to purchase supplies for their general store, leaving her alone on her birthday, and Edgar felt even worse.

For her part, Maude never seemed too bothered by it. Or, at least, she put on a brave face. Deep down, Edgar reckoned it hurt her more than she let on.

How could it not? To him, not acknowledging her birthday was almost like not acknowledging that Maude was their daughter at all.

And he knew for a fact that Mr. and Mrs. Harding, Maude's folks, loved her. In Edgar's opinion—not that he believed his opinion mattered all that much in the grand scheme of things—they just didn't do a good job of showing it.

With trembling hands, Maude opened the box and he watched as her eyes grew wide as she pulled out the thin silver chain with the small gem fixed into the pendant.

Edgar took the box from her and she held the necklace up to the light, admiring the way the sunlight sparkled off the surface of the stone.

"They say it's called an opal," he said helpfully.

"It's beautiful, Edgar. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen," she said, and then frowned and shook her head. "It's too much, though. I... I can't accept this."

"Like hell you can't," he replied. "It's my money and I can spend it on whatever I want. You're my best friend and what I wanted was to get you a birthday gift."

"But, Edgar—"

"We ain't gonna have this argument, Maude. It's my birthday gift to you, so you can't give it back."

She arched an eyebrow at him. "I can't, huh?"

"Of course not. It'd be plain rude."

Maude laughed and Edgar knew he'd won her over. He knew Maude had precious few nice things she could call her own, and he

knew she didn't want to give up the necklace, no matter how much she protested.

The truth was, it had cost Edgar a pretty penny, probably more than he should have spent. But he reasoned that it was her eighteenth birthday and she deserved something nice to mark the day.

He figured her parents wouldn't have done much for her, even if they had been in town. And he couldn't have that.

Without waiting for her to speak again, Edgar gently took the necklace from her hand and stepped behind her. Maude pulled her long hair, the color of spun gold, to the side, allowing him to drape the necklace around her neck.

He fastened the clasp and stepped back, looking down at it. She ran the tips of her long, slender fingers over the stone, a look of rapture on her face. And when she finally raised her gaze to his, Edgar saw the tears welling in her eyes.

"Aw, you're not going to start bawlin' are you?" he asked sarcastically.

"I might," she replied with a trembling laugh. "It's just… nobody's ever done somethin' so nice for me before."

"Well, you deserve it."

"Thank you, Edgar. This means a lot to me. It means the world," she said.

"You're welcome."

They turned and followed the path down to the edge of the Big Bison River in silence. Maude kept looking down at her necklace as if she thought it would disappear if she took her eyes off of it.

Edgar thought the smile curling the edges of her mouth upward made her look even more beautiful than ever. The day was a bit warmer than was typical for this time of year, but he didn't think it was so warm as to be unpleasant.

The sound of rushing water and birdsong from the treetops filled his ears, and the air was saturated with the heavy, earthy musk of the forest around them. It was a nice day, and the company made it even better.

Edgar knew a lot of folks were partial to the big cities in New York, or places like Boston or Philadelphia. Places with all the modern conveniences.

But Edgar thought they were missing out on the natural beauty of a place like the Wyoming Territory. You just couldn't beat open fields of grass and wildflowers that stretched on forever like they said the ocean did.

There was something magical about forests filled with trees that seemed to reach the heavens themselves. And Edgar didn't think you could beat the crystal-clear water in the lakes and rivers.

It was beautiful—you could really feel the hand of God at work in land like the Wyoming Territory. It was pure and unspoiled by man, and he imagined that divine hand was missing in the big cities.

"You're eighteen now. A woman," Edgar pointed out. "You ever give thought to what you're gonna do with your life?"

Maude's face clouded over and she shrugged. "I guess I'll be workin' in the family store. They're givin' me more responsibility.

"Groomin' me to take over eventually, I suppose."

Edgar waved her off. It was the answer he had expected, but not the one he wanted to hear. Maude had always been the good, dutiful daughter and never thought about what she wanted in own life. For herself.

Her every waking thought seemed to be about her family, her every decision focused on what was best for them. But she never seemed to consider what was in her own best interest.

Granted, Edgar knew that was how he lived his life, too. Out there on the frontier, that was what one had to do to survive.

You looked out for you and yours, did what was necessary to help your family flourish in a land that was as empty and could be as cruel as the Wyoming Territory.

But that didn't mean Edgar didn't have dreams and desires of his own. That didn't mean there weren't things that he wanted in his life. Things just for himself.

He knew he might never get them, but being able to have that dream was enough for him most days. Being able to be selfish and think of himself and what he wanted, rather than what his family needed, if only for a little while, helped him get by.

It was silly, but he thought it kept that sense of hope burning inside of him. And out there on the fringes, hope was a powerful thing.

It wasn't that Edgar didn't like it out on the frontier. He did. Very much.

But he wanted more than just to live in the same small house with his family, doing the same work in the same fields, day after day until he finally died. He wanted more out of his life than that, and he often dreamed of it.

Edgar also made plans to make those dreams of his a reality. He put money away and kept his eye out for ranches that went up for sale.

He read the newspapers and gathered more information, just to keep his hopes and dreams alive. And he wanted the same for Maude.

"But if you could do anything you wanted, anything in the world, what would you do?" he pressed.

She shrugged again. "I don't rightly know. I've never really thought about it. Doesn't seem to be much point when I already know what my future's gonna be.

"And if I'm bein' honest, that's all right with me. I want to take over the store. Want to run it my way. I mean, I'd be the only woman store owner in Mayfield.

"That's kind of excitin', isn't it?" she prompted.

"Yeah, I suppose it is. You'd be unique, that's for sure. But you don't need to run the store for that to be true."

She smiled as color bloomed in her cheeks, forcing her to look away. Maude had never been very good about taking compliments.

Edgar thought it was because her folks never took the time to praise her or make her feel appreciated like she deserved. Not that he thought they should coddle her, but they could have done a better job of showing her she was loved.

One of the things that had always impressed Edgar about Maude was that despite all that, she was a confident woman. He thought she was strong. Intelligent.

Although she might not be able to take a compliment, and her folks hadn't done much to build her up, she did a good job of building herself up, anyway.

She was a passionate and smart woman who knew herself inside and out. She knew her strengths and weaknesses well, and she embraced both.

Edgar thought it was an admirable quality in a person.

"So, you really want to take over the store?" he asked. "That's what you want to do with your life?"

"Wouldn't be such a bad life at all, if you ask me. It's what my folks have been teachin' me to do all these years.

"Kind of," she amended. "They said they'd teach me the important lessons when I turned eighteen."

"Yeah, but none of us knows what our future's really gonna be, Maude. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that life can take some unexpected turns and your whole world can change, just like that," he said, snapping his fingers to emphasize his point.

"I suppose. But my life ain't ever changed much. Don't see any

reason for it to change now."

"But that's just it… life's unpredictable. It changes when you least expect it to."

She laughed softly. "Since when did you start gettin' all philosophical?"

Edgar shrugged, a small smile playing across his lips. "Wouldn't say I am all that philosophical. I just think a lot. Not much else to do when you're out in the fields."

"So, what about you? If you could do anything, what would it be?"

"Honestly? I'd like my own ranch. I'd like my own homestead."

She smiled. "But you have that already. Your family—"

"It's a farm. A small farm, at that. Besides, I don't know if I want to stay here."

"What?" She glanced at him sharply.

He shrugged. "I mean, I love Mayfield, don't get me wrong. It's where I was born, after all," Edgar told her. "But there's a whole big world out there.

"And from what I've been hearin', the government is talkin' about openin' that world up to homesteaders. They're talkin' about givin' away big plots of land."

She nodded. "I heard my father speakin' on that. But he says they'll only open up homesteadin' to citizens of the States."

“Well, maybe by the time they pass somethin’ to open up the country to homesteadin’, the Wyoming Territory will be a state.”

“Those things take a while, from what I understand,” Maude hedged. “My father says it’ll be some time before we’re granted statehood.”

“Yeah, I know. But that’s why it’s a dream,” Edgar told her. “For now, at least. Like I said, you just don’t know what the future holds.”

She smiled and they fell silent as they continued walking along the bank of the river. The Big Bison River, or the Double B as they called it, was a wide, slow-moving river that flowed down from the north.

It was deep enough to accommodate a barge, which was what people used to bring supplies down from the north. That was why Edgar and Maude were on the riverbank that morning.

Maude’s parents had ridden up north about a week ago and were supposed to be coming back on the barge with their goods, so they had walked out to meet them when they came in.

The Double B emptied into a large lake that fronted the town of Mayfield, before continuing its southward journey, so the land around the town was green and lush.

The lake was also full of fish, which Edgar thought was nice. He loved having a good trout or salmon for dinner from time to time.

All in all, Edgar thought Mayfield—and the Wyoming Territory as a whole—was pretty idyllic. It was a good place to put down roots and have some kids.

But despite all that, some small piece of Edgar suffered from wanderlust. Some small piece of him wanted to see what else the country, which was growing by the year, had to offer.

Of course, if the rumors of the war brewing between the States turned out to be true, the country might stop growing. A war might very well shatter and fragment the land, and it could stop being a united country at all.

If that happened and the country was forever split, Edgar wondered what was going to happen to the idea of homesteading. Would it just be a free-for-all, with the largest parcels of land going to those with the guns and the will to hold it?

There was a lot up in the air, but Edgar knew with questions about slavery and states' rights, the tension between the states was starting to grow.

He hoped with everything in him that they were able to nip it in the bud and settle their differences before it got out of hand. The last thing a new country needed was a war that ripped everything and everybody apart.

As they rounded a bend that would put them out on the shore of the lake, Edgar paused. Up ahead, he could see men running back and forth on the docks that jutted out into the lake.

They were pointing and shouting, but were too far away for him to hear what they were saying.

"Something's on fire," Maude said with a note of worry in her voice.

It was then that Edgar noticed the wispy column of dark smoke

drifting up from something at the end of the dock. She was right.

Something was burning, and he felt a tightening in his gut knowing that whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good.

"Come on, let's go see—"

He shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

But Maude wasn't listening. She had already pulled her skirts up and dashed off toward the commotion out on the docks.

A grimace on his face, Edgar took off, easily catching up to her with his longer stride. But when she got to the dock itself, Edgar reached out and grabbed hold of her arm.

Although the crowd at the end of the short pier was thick, Edgar could see what was burning, and he felt his heart sink into his stomach.

It was a river barge. And through the gaps between the people milling about out there, he could see the torn and broken bodies on the deck.

Old Man Peters, one of Mayfield's original residents, was ambling down the dock toward him, suddenly looking vastly older than he was. He stopped in front of them, deep lines of sorrow etched into his face and his blue eyes shimmering with tears.

"It was Injuns," he said, his deep voice cracking. "Damn Injuns. I'm so sorry, girl. So damn sorry."

And in that moment, Edgar suddenly regretted everything he'd said as they walked along the riverbank about life changing in the blink

of an eye, and their futures being uncertain.

Maude's entire world had just been turned upside down—and her future now was anything but certain.

2

Maude wiped away the tears that rolled down her cheeks only to have fresh ones take their place.

She felt like she hadn't stopped crying since the barge had drifted into Big Bison Lake a few days ago, carrying the bodies of her parents and six other people besides.

The others were bound for towns farther south than Mayfield, but with nobody to say where they belonged, they had been buried in Mayfield's potter's field.

Despite the cold gloom of the morning, most of the town had turned out to bid a final farewell to her parents, who were being buried on their family land.

Maude knew that her folks, for all their flaws, were good people. They were beloved in Mayfield, and she could see that others were taking their deaths as hard as she was.

It should have brought her some small sense of comfort to know others shared her pain. But it didn't. None of them could know what it was like to lose your entire family in one go.

What it was like to be left completely alone in the world.

"...We therefore commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life. Amen," Father Winston intoned.

"Amen," the crowd murmured in response.

Maude remained where she was, sitting in the chair by the graveside of her parents as the crowd began to disperse.

Some of them gave her shoulder a squeeze that was supposed to be reassuring as they passed by, while others murmured their condolences. Through it all, Maude sat there, unmoving, not speaking, and barely breathing.

She was completely numb from head to toe and didn't register the words of the mourners anymore than she had registered Father Winston's.

Through it all, Edgar sat in the chair next to her, silent as a stone, which she thought was unusual for him. He never seemed to be at a loss for words when they were together, but around others, he tended to clam up.

His presence, though, was a comfort to her. As the last of the mourners headed back toward their horses and wagons, Edgar reached over and took her hand, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

Ever since they'd found the bodies of her folks on that barge, Edgar had been around almost constantly. He'd scarcely left Maude's side over the last few days and she knew she would have been lost without him.

She'd barely been able to function as she grappled with her grief, and Edgar had taken up all of the chores around the house, making sure she had food to eat and whatever else she needed.

He'd taken good care of her, and she was thankful. Maude didn't even want to imagine what kind of a wreck she would have been, if not for him.

"Thank you for bein' here," she murmured.

"Of course. I'd never let you go through this on your own."

"No, I mean for bein' here through all of this. I'd probably still be in a heap in the dirt by the docks if it hadn't been for you," she said as she turned to him.

"You've taken care of me and I can't tell you how much I appreciate it, Edgar."

His smile was wan. "We're best friends, Maude. You don't have to thank me. We're practically family, and I know you'd have done the same for me."

Edgar helped Maude to her feet as Father Winston stopped in front of her, an expression of genuine sympathy on his face.

The priest was a large man, as tall as he was wide, with thinning hair that was iron gray and eyes that sparkled like sapphires in the sun.

Maude had known Father Winston since she was born and knew him to be a good, kind man who would literally give the shirt off his back to help somebody in need.

But as he looked at her, Maude could see that he didn't know how to go about helping her.

Death wasn't uncommon in Mayfield. As beautiful as the Wyoming Territory was, it could be a cold and cruel land, as well.

Survival out there wasn't guaranteed. It took work and fortitude to make a go of it.

Those were lessons Maude's parents had taught her, and it hit her all over again that they wouldn't be around to impart any more of those practical teachings. The thought brought fresh tears to her eyes.

Edgar helped Maude to her feet and Father Winston enveloped her in a hug, pulling her tightly to him. She took comfort in it, but still felt the hollow pang of loss and grief echo through her.

Father Winston gave her one final squeeze and stepped back. He held onto her hands, his eyes boring into hers.

"I'm so sorry, Maude. If there is anything you need, anything at all, please don't be afraid to ask. You know I'm here for you.

"The whole church is," he said, his voice deep and rumbling.

"Thank you, Father. I will."

He gave her a nod, then turned and shook hands with Edgar, exchanging a few quiet words with him. Maude's eyes fell to the two earthen mounds marked with wooden crosses before her.

The final resting place of her parents.

“C’mon, Maude,” Edgar said gently as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s get you inside and out of the cold.”

Maude’s legs were weak and she felt like they were going to give out under her, but Edgar kept hold of her, kept her from falling and walked her from the field into the house.

A house that suddenly felt too large, too empty, and seemed too quiet.

Maude let Edgar guide her over to a chair set before the hearth—her father’s chair. He quickly built a fire as thunder rumbled in the distance.

“Storm’s coming in. Probably be here in a few hours,” Edgar said as he stacked a couple of logs on the burning kindling.

The arms of the chair were smooth beneath her hands and the cushion she sat on was soft and well broken in. But it felt too large for her.

The chair engulfed her and the pain that lanced her heart drove home the feeling of just how wrong it was. Tears spilled down Maude’s cheeks.

She looked up at Edgar as she was gripped by a cold fist of grief. “This is wrong. This is my pa’s chair, Edgar. This ain’t my chair, I can’t be sittin’ here in his chair—”

Maude’s voice was cut off by a choked sob that came bursting from her throat. And then Edgar was there, on his knees before her, clutching her hands.

He gave them a firm squeeze and made her look into his deep,

dark eyes, which were filled with an earnest compassion that clutched her heart tightly.

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but this is your chair now, Maude. This is your chair. Your house. You’re the woman of the house now,” he said softly.

“There ain’t no wrong in you sittin’ in a chair that’s rightfully yours.”

“But my pa—”

“Would tell you the same thing I’m tellin’ you if he were here,” Edgar said firmly.

“He would. And I think when you’re able to see through your grief, you’ll know I’m tellin’ you true.”

“But this was my pa’s chair,” she protested weakly.

“And I know for a fact that your pa wouldn’t want you sittin’ on the floor when there’s a perfectly good chair available,” Edgar replied.

The absurdity of his statement hit her as hard as a horse kick and Maude’s laughter erupted from out of nowhere. She wondered if it was more pent-up emotion bursting out than his statement actually being that funny.

The emotions had been bubbling up inside of her for days now, and Maude had been holding onto them so tightly, not letting them spill out, while the pressure continued to build.

Now she was out of the public eye, alone with somebody she felt

comfortable with, and the dam had burst. Everything came flooding out in the form of laughter that bordered on hysteria.

As her laughter faded, Maude scrubbed her face with her hands, trying in vain to banish the neverending stream of tears.

Finding their bodies had been bad enough, but putting her parents in the ground had made everything real in a way it hadn't been before.

Prior to the funeral, Maude had allowed herself to exist in a fairytale land where her parents would come through the door, and that everything would turn out all right.

But looking through the window and seeing those two earthen lumps out in the field dispelled the notion that they would be coming through the door again.

It burst that fairytale bubble she had been clinging to, and solidified the idea in Maude's mind that nothing would ever be all right again.

She and Edgar sat in front of the fire for a very long time that night. Neither of them spoke and yet, she still felt comforted by his presence.

Still, no matter how long they sat there, Maude couldn't feel herself getting any more comfortable in that chair.

"You sure you want to do this today?" Edgar asked.

"There's no sense in putting it off," Maude replied. "My decision's

made, so I just need to get to it. The sooner this is done, the sooner I can get on with my life."

"But it's your family store," he argued.

Maude picked up a small glass figurine and admired the way it sparkled in the sunlight that was slanting in through the large plate-glass front windows, creating a beautiful rainbow of color on the table.

It made her happy, so she set the figurine aside. It was something she had decided to take with her.

"Maude, maybe you should take a couple of days—"

"It's been two weeks since the funeral and I've thought of little else," she interrupted him.

"The fact of the matter is that I'm not capable of running this store on my own. My parents hadn't yet taught me what it takes to keep the store going."

"C'mon, now," Edgar protested. "It can't be that hard, can it?"

She cast an irritated gaze his way. "Do you know how to negotiate with suppliers? Do you know how to haggle with them to make sure you're not gettin' ripped off?

"Do you know how to keep the books and the store supplied to make sure you're not gettin' into deep debt, rather than turnin' a profit?"

He shuffled his feet, kicking at a small bit of dust on the ground in front of him. Edgar finally sighed and slipped his hands into his

pockets.

He leaned against the counter, an incredulous expression on his face. “No, I suppose I don’t,” he admitted.

“Neither do I,” she told him. “It’s one of those things they were gonna teach me after I turned eighteen.”

“I’m sorry.”

Maude gave him a sad smile. “Yeah. Me too.”

Over the past couple of weeks, she had been able to make some semblance of peace with the death of her parents. At least, she had gotten to a point where she didn’t collapse into a puddle of tears and misery at the mere thought of them.

But it was a tenuous hold on her emotions. She could feel the grief still bubbling below the surface, and she feared the slightest thing could set her off.

The nightmares had finally begun to ease. She was no longer seeing those awful images every single time she closed her eyes. And for that, she was thankful.

But as she’d settled into this new life, it had occurred to her that she was not properly equipped to run the store. Maude didn’t know what she was doing.

She worried that if she tried, she would make a hash of it all and end up destroying everything her parents had worked so hard to build. That was the last thing she wanted to do to them and to their legacy.

Maude decided she would rather close the store while people still remembered it—and them—as they were, instead of running the store into the ground.

“My parents have some money put away that I can live on for a while. I’ve got the house.

“Things could be a lot worse, if you think about it,” she said, trying to avoid sounding as scared as she felt.

“What will you do for work?”

Maude shook her head. “I don’t know yet. But I’ve got some time to think about it.”

Edgar put some things into a box and nailed the lid down, then turned to her. The emotions she saw playing across his face mirrored those turning her insides upside down.

A frown flickered across his lips, pulling at her heart and making her question whether or not she was doing the right thing, after all. Should she be trying to make a go of it, rather than simply packing it all in?

Maude’s decision to close the shop hadn’t come easy. She had gone back and forth a thousand times. In fact, she was still going back and forth about it.

But the logical part of her mind told her she was making the right decision. That she was not prepared for the responsibility of running a store.

Maude knew she was an intelligent woman. But there was a difference between being smart and being business smart, and

Maude knew she was definitely not the latter.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Edgar asked. “I mean, really sure?”

“Want? No. It’s like I’m losin’ my family all over again,” she told him. “But I know it’s the smart thing to do.

“Mr. Prescott said he’d buy up all my inventory. That, combined with what my folks left me, should tide me over for a while.”

Edgar looked at her for a long moment, seemingly as upset as she was, but also seeming to arrive at the same, inevitable conclusion. It was time to let things go and leave the past where it belonged… in the past.

Maude couldn’t lie though, it hurt. And just as she recognized that familiar dull ache inside of her, Maude’s control over her emotions slipped and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

As she covered her face with her hands, Maude’s entire body shook. She was racked by hard, violent sobs. But then, Edgar was there.

He pulled her into a warm embrace and she pressed her face into his shoulder, drawing strength and comfort from him. She cried until she couldn’t cry anymore.

And when she was finally all cried out, she pulled back and saw that she’d left a big wet spot on his shirt. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and gave him a wavering smile.

“Sorry about your shirt,” she said.

He gave her a wry grin. “It’s all right. It’s time to wash it anyway.”

“I feel like I don’t know what I’m doin’, Edgar.”

“I think you know better than you realize.”

“I sure don’t feel like it.” She sighed.

He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his smile gentle. Edgar’s dark eyes locked onto hers and she felt something inside of her shift.

It was as if his gaze was imbuing her with a strength and a sense of certainty she didn’t have before.

“It’s like I said, life can change in a heartbeat,” he said softly. “Now you have a chance to live a life you never even dreamed of before, Maude.

“You can do anything you want.”

His words washed over her, seeming to carry even more weight than they had when he’d first spoken them on the riverbank—in what now seemed like another life altogether.

But he was right. Maude knew she could do whatever she wanted. She supposed she just needed to figure out what that was.

Turning to him, Maude gave Edgar a smile that just felt a little more certain than it had been just a few moments ago.

“Let’s finish packing this place up,” she said.

“Atta girl,” he replied.

3

One Year Later…

The whistle blew, ending another day at the factory. As the Wyoming Territory made a push for statehood, the territorial governor was trying to modernize the town.

He'd apparently figured one of the best ways to attain statehood was to show that the territory was ready to be a player on the new national stage.

And one way to show that was to lay track for the railroad. Nothing said modern territory like railroad access.

So, about eight months ago, the mayor had had a factory built in town with the sole purpose of turning out track.

It was hot, laborious work, and the hours were long, but Edgar still thought it was better than plowing fields. It also paid pretty well.

Edgar's pa hadn't been thrilled with it at first, but he'd hired a couple of good men to help in the fields, and with what he was making, Edgar was able to chip in with the expenses around home.

Pa was happy with that. Edgar was also able to save some money, and he was building up a nice little nest egg that he thought should allow him to get his ranch started.

At least, once Wyoming attained statehood and the homesteading acts passed Congress.

The last he'd read, the discussions about homesteading the west had involved granting something like a hundred and fifty acres to whoever headed out to the new territories.

It was a pretty good start, as far as Edgar was concerned. A hundred and fifty acres would let him build a nice home, and have enough land for livestock.

If he was going to raise horses and cows, which was where the money would be, he needed land to do it.

That was the dream. Of course, it all hinged on whether the states were going to war with each other.

Those drumbeats were growing louder, and although he was hoping there was some big change in the offing, he feared war between the north and the south might be inevitable at that point.

There had certainly been enough saber rattling between the two.

A war was the last thing Edgar wanted or needed right now, since it would destroy the plans he had been making. While working in the track factory was fine for now, that was not how he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

He wanted to live in open country, on his own ranch, overseeing his herds of horses and cows. More than anything, Edgar wanted to

get out of Mayfield.

“Hey, Edgar, want to go grab a beer at McCarty’s? Maybe play a couple hands of poker?”

He turned to see Charlie Perkins falling into step beside him. He was a big, burly, affable guy.

Edgar didn’t go out of his way to make friends, so he didn’t have many as a result, but Charlie was definitely one of them. He was gruff, but a good man.

“Can’t tonight,” he replied. “Meeting Maude for dinner.”

His friend nodded. “How’s she doin’?”

“She’s doin’ all right. Took her a bit to recover from her parents dyin’, but she landed on her feet well enough.”

“That’s good. She’s a good woman,” Charlie said. “And personally, I think you could use a good woman in your life.”

Edgar laughed softly. “It’s not like that. She’s my best friend. We grew up together.”

“Doesn’t mean things can’t change.”

“Trust me, this is one of those things that isn’t going to change. We’ve known each other too long. We know each other too well.”

He smirked. “You keep tellin’ yourself that.”

Edgar gave him a smile. “Have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“If you change your mind, I’ll keep a stool at McCarty’s warm for you.”

He stopped by one of the wash basins and splashed some cold water on his face, then washed his hands.

Edgar knew he was dirty and that he smelled after a long, physically grueling day, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. He’d wash up and change his clothes when he got home.

Edgar walked across town, looking around himself, He was still trying to get used to all the changes that had been wrought in Mayfield over the last year.

It was definitely not the same town it had been just twelve months ago.

With the push for statehood and the track factory being put up in Mayfield, it had attracted a lot of new residents, as well as a lot of new businesses.

All of a sudden, Mayfield had gone from sleepy little hamlet to boom town. It was maybe not as cosmopolitan as New York or Philadelphia, but if things kept going the way they were, Edgar thought it might not be long before it was.

The white clapboard schoolhouse sat on the edge of town, well away from the saloons and brothels and all the other things the children shouldn’t be seeing.

Though, at the rate Mayfield was growing, Edgar wondered how much longer that would be true. As he approached the schoolhouse, the two front doors banged open.

A tide of squealing laughter and raised voices washed over him as the children dashed out, bounded down the stairs, and flooded out into the streets, happy to be free for another day.

Edgar waited at the foot of the stairs and a couple of minutes later, Maude stepped out, squinting in the bright sunlight of the day. When her gaze fell on him, she smiled wide and walked down the steps.

It was their usual routine. Most days, after his shift at the track factory, Edgar walked over to the schoolhouse to fetch her.

With as many new faces as there were in Mayfield of late, some of them pretty rough around the edges, he didn't feel comfortable with her walking around alone anymore.

"And how was your day?" Maude asked.

"Hot. Sweaty. Backbreaking work."

"So, the usual."

"Yeah, pretty much," he replied.

"You could always quit and go work on your family farm."

"Pass. But thanks," Edgar said with a chuckle. "How about I clean up and we go grab a bite to eat? I've heard that restaurant that just opened up is outstanding."

"That sounds good to me," she said.

"Great. Then let me walk you back to your place, and I'll go home and clean myself up."

She gave Edgar a smile as they headed out. As they walked along, they made small talk, and Edgar couldn't help but notice the small smile on her lips.

It struck Edgar again just how much she had grown and changed over the last year, since her parents died. He could see that she still mourned her parents, of course.

But, having been set free from the expectations they'd placed on her and able to live the life she wanted, Maude had flourished.

She was even more confident and certain of herself. Edgar thought it was almost like she was an entirely different person than the one he had grown up with.

Edgar knew it was terrible to say, given what Maude had gone through and what she'd lost, but losing her parents might have been the best thing that could have happened to her.

It had forced her to see that she had the strength to stand on her own two feet. It showed her that she had the ability to be the sort of person she never knew she could be. The person she was now—strong and capable.

"How was school today?" I asked.

"Trying. The kids just refuse to listen sometimes," she replied. "But, on the other hand, they're all just lovely. They're a lot of fun."

"So, you're glad you decided to work for the school?"

"Yeah, actually. I love what I'm doing. It makes me happy and as troublesome as they can be, I love teaching them. It gives me a

sense of purpose."

"Good, Maude. That's real good."

Maude nodded, a smile of pure contentment crossing her face. It was the sort of smile that had become more frequent over the last few months, the smile of somebody who was enjoying their life and everything in it.

It was especially good to see because a year ago, Edgar had never thought he would see it from her. For a time, he'd worried that Maude would never pull herself out of the pit of despair she'd landed in after her parents died.

But she had. She had not only pulled herself out of that pit, but she'd come out of it an entirely different person.

It was like when her parents were alive, she had been forced to live in a cocoon and be a certain person. Now that they had passed and she was free to live the life she wanted, Maude had emerged a beautiful butterfly.

But the one thing Edgar also saw was that there was still a pit of loneliness inside of her. She missed her parents and he knew she still hadn't quite gotten used to rambling around in the family home all by herself.

He often sat with her at night, chatting in front of the hearth until she was ready to turn in.

"Oh, hey, I forgot to tell you—I got a letter from my aunt in Boston yesterday," she said.

"Oh, really?"

She nodded. “It’s been a long while since I’ve heard from her,” Maude replied, her smile faltering slightly. “She didn’t even make it out for ma and pa’s funeral.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s not easy to get here from Boston, what with us not havin’ a train runnin’ through here yet and all,” he said.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Edgar could feel her mood darkening as her face clouded over with a myriad of emotions. He knew the fact that her aunt hadn’t come down for the funeral had hurt her.

At the same time, he could see Maude was clinging to the idea of having family in her life again. It was what she’d been missing, that family connection.

As close as she and Edgar were, he knew there were holes inside of her, in her heart, that he’d never be able to fill.

When Edgar said they were like family, he believed it was true. But being like family wasn’t the same as being actual family.

And he knew that was something she had been missing since her parents passed on. If reconnecting with her aunt could help salve some of those wounds that remained within her, Edgar wanted to encourage that.

But he also feared that it would be setting her up for more hurt and disappointment if her aunt turned out to be less than she was looking for. Less than she wanted.

Edgar didn’t want to see Maude getting her hopes up only to have them crushed. He knew it could put her back into that same dark,

emotional pit she had been in after her parents died.

“So, what did your aunt have to say?” he asked.

“Nothing much, honestly. She apologized for not being able to make it out for the funeral.

“Said it broke her heart to lose her sister like that and that she was still grieving the loss. She just wanted to know how I was handling all of it.”

“Overall, I’d say you’re handling it pretty well,” Edgar said, earning a small smile from her. “And it’s good that she’s trying to connect with you like that.”

Maude nodded. “I think so, too. I haven’t seen her since I was a really little girl so it’s nice to hear from her again.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Oh, I’ll write her back, of course. She’s family, Edgar. Even if she hasn’t been around most of my life. I miss having a family.”

“I know you do. I just worry that she’s not gonna turn out to be all you’re hopin’ she’ll be.”

She gave him a wry smile. “I’m a big girl. I can handle disappointment. God knows I’ve had to deal with plenty of it in my life.”

A rueful laugh passed Edgar’s lips. “Yeah. I suppose you have.”

“Besides, it’s just a letter. If she doesn’t write back, or doesn’t seem interested in being family again, I won’t let it bother me too

much."

He turned and looked at her, his expression serious. "I hope not, Maude."

"Trust me. I know how to avoid gettin' my hopes up."

They made it to her house and Edgar told her that he would be back with the buggy to take her to dinner after he cleaned up and changed.

He walked away, letting everything they'd discussed spin through his mind. He kept hearing her tell him that she could handle the disappointment of her aunt not being what Maude thought she might be.

She'd told him that she wouldn't get her hopes up, that she would be fine. But as Edgar left her at her gate and walked down the road toward his house, Maude's words rattled around in his mind.

All he could hope was that she was right. Edgar had his doubts, and that worried him.

4

Maude couldn't keep the smile from her face as she held Aunt Tilda's latest letter to her breast. In it, she'd told Maude of a ball she had recently attended, the details of which had left Maude swooning.

As a member of Boston's high society, Aunt Tilda was invited to all of the formal balls and gatherings that to Maude sounded like something out of a dream, or perhaps a fairy tale.

Truthfully, Maude had never been one of those girls who dreamed of fancy gowns, elaborate balls, and charming men. She had always believed that her lot in life was there in Mayfield, and always would be.

As charming as the town was—and as quickly as it was growing—Mayfield would never be Boston or Philadelphia. The rural town might aspire to be cosmopolitan, but she was smart enough to know it was never going to attract the cream of society.

Even if the Wyoming Territory was able to attain statehood, Mayfield was never going to be a sprawling metropolis some in town had deluded themselves into thinking it might someday be.

But Boston was everything Mayfield aspired to be. It was a center of style and culture, as well as intellectual and philosophical thought.

It was strange for Maude to even be thinking things like that when a year ago, considerations like the importance of intellectual and philosophical thought never would have entered her mind.

At one point, Maude had thought her life and her future were set. She'd believed that she was going to take over the store when her parents decided to step down.

After that, she would likely find a suitable match, start a family, and live out the rest of her days there on the banks of the Double B, then end up right where her parents were now—beneath an earthen mound out on their property.

As if the thought had pulled her attention to them, Maude turned her head to see the graves outside, the mounds now covered in grass and wildflowers.

Edgar had built a small fence around the plots, sectioning off the burial mounds and creating what amounted to a family cemetery.

A shudder passed through her as the image of her parents the day they'd arrived on that river barge flashed through her mind.

Moving quickly, Maude tore her eyes away from the window and stared into the flames of the hearth, banishing those images from her mind. She drew in a deep quavering breath and let it out slowly.

It had been some time since she'd seen those nightmare pictures in her mind's eye, and their sudden reappearance left her feeling

shaken.

Maude sat back in the chair—her father's chair—and closed her eyes, giving her heart time to slow and the trembling in her body to stop.

The crackle and pop of the logs in the fire sounded incredibly loud in the silence, so she tried to focus on that rather than the torn and bloody faces of her parents.

After a few moments, the terrible, unwanted memory loosened its grip on her and Maude finally felt like she was able to breathe again.

She looked down at the letter in her hands and read the words Aunt Tilda had written to her once more, even though she already had every last one memorized.

It once again set her heart racing, though, her mind spinning with the endless possibilities that, once upon a time, she never would have considered.

A knock on the door pulled Maude out of her head. She leapt to her feet, dashed over to the door, and yanked it open breathlessly.

Edgar seemed startled by how quickly she had opened the door, but he quickly recovered and offered her a smile.

"And what has you lookin' so excited?" he asked.

"Come in, come in," she said, trying to control herself.

Maude ushered him inside and closed the door. Edgar looked at her strangely, as if trying to figure out what had her so frantic.

Maude couldn't blame him.

She was running around like a lunatic. She had been so caught up in Aunt Tilda's letter that she had almost forgotten she'd invited him over for supper.

And when the thought occurred to her, Maude realized she hadn't even started making anything. Aunt Tilda's letter had knocked her off-balance and she felt like she was still trying to regain her equilibrium.

Standing in the middle of the front room, Maude racked her brain, going through everything she had in the larder and cold room and trying to figure out what she could cobble together and make something that resembled a meal.

Edgar's chuckle drew her attention back to him and he just shook his head.

"Come sit down. Tell me what's got you in such a state," he suggested. "We'll go into town for supper afterward."

Maude looked down at the letter in her hand and felt her stomach tighten. In all of the excitement of her aunt's letter, she'd never even considered the obvious.

And the obvious was standing right in front of her.

Maude's smile slipped and, all of a sudden, she felt like the wind had been taken out of her sails as the excitement that had been flowing through her entire body ebbed.

Maude walked over to her pa's chair and sat down. The one thought that ran through her mind as she sat there was that Edgar

had turned out to be right.

She had grown into and gotten used to the chair. Maude still couldn't help but think of it as her pa's chair, but she no longer felt like she shouldn't be sitting in it.

As time passed and wounds healed, it had become less and less uncomfortable. And, eventually, the chair made her think only of the good memories she associated with him.

Like most things, it seemed, Edgar was right. He had been a source of strength and calming comfort for Maude for most of her life.

But never more so than he'd been over the last year. Maude honestly didn't know that she would have made it out of the darkness she'd been mired in after the loss of her parents without him.

He had been there for her in every way possible, every way she needed. He had been the light that helped to lead her out of that seemingly perpetual gloom she'd existed in.

And now, despite all of that, Maude was considering giving it up.

Edgar dropped another couple of logs onto the hearth and waited for them to catch fire before he sat down in the chair next to hers. As Maude stared into the flames, she could feel his eyes on her.

His gaze seemed to have a weight, a presence, that pressed down on her. She struggled to put order to her thoughts as he waited for answers.

The paper in her hand crackled and Maude looked down at it, feeling somehow as if she was betraying Edgar by even considering

what her aunt was proposing.

“Another letter from your aunt?” he prompted.

“Yes,” Maude said softly.

A moment of silence stretched out between them as he waited for her to elaborate upon it, as she had with every other letter she’d received.

Edgar had been so kind and patient with her. He simply sat there, listening to her read him every line, sometimes twice, and then talking about it with her afterward.

He never failed to give her some important perspective or piece of advice she took to heart.

It seemed strange to Maude that she had been exchanging letters with her Aunt Tilda for so long.

As far as she knew, her aunt was her only remaining family, and part of her longed for that connection with somebody she was related to by blood.

Maude knew it sounded like a slap in the face to Edgar, for everything he had done for her, but she didn’t mean it that way.

She’d talked to him about it plenty of times and for his part, he’d said he understood and didn’t feel slighted by it—proving to her once more that he was a good man with a good heart.

But the bottom line was that Edgar was her best friend. He had always been her best friend and always would. She cared for him deeply, and he had her heart.

But there were holes in her soul that a friend couldn't fill—holes that could only be filled by family, only somebody who shared her blood.

Edgar never seemed hurt by it, nor did he take offense to it. It was just another thing that Maude appreciated about him.

He made her life so much easier and so much better, and she would always be grateful to him for that.

"Well? What did she say this time?" Edgar finally asked. "It has to be something pretty interestin' to have you so worked up about it."

"I'm not worked up," Maude protested lamely.

He grinned at her. "You sure about that?"

"I am."

"Well, then, you're definitely in some kind of state," he said. "You're also duckin' my question, which means it must be very interestin' indeed. What's it say?"

Biting her bottom lip, Maude laid the sheet of paper in her lap, the words on the page echoing through her mind. She honestly didn't even know how to broach the subject with him. It hurt to even contemplate it.

Maude cleared her throat and picked up the letter again. She looked at the words on the page written in neat, flowing script. And then, she started to read, acting as if the words her aunt had written to her weren't already seared into her mind.

Edgar listened to her intently as she pretended to read the letter

recounting the details of the latest gala her aunt had attended and tried to pretend she wasn't envious.

As she read, Maude imagined being one of those women, wearing a beautiful silk gown on the arm of a society gentleman. She thought about dancing to the soft music, spinning around the dance floor, and being the envy of every woman there.

She felt almost as if she was there, and it filled her with the purest sense of jealousy she'd ever felt.

Maude had never thought about, nor wanted to be one of those women, until Aunt Tilda had started writing to her and telling her of these grand affairs.

Maude stopped when she got to the bottom of the page and the offer her aunt had made to her. But Edgar's eyes weighed heavy on her and she could tell that he knew there was more to the letter, that she was not being entirely forthright with him.

He'd always had a keen sense for when she was and wasn't being honest.

"What is it?" he prompted her.

"It's just…" Maude's voice trailed off and she felt her heart turn a somersault in her chest as she tried, and failed, to force the words out of her mouth.

Maude knew that once she read them out loud, they would be out there, and she knew that the fact that she had even considered her aunt's offer would hurt Edgar deeply.

He would be a gentleman and not make her feel terrible for it. He

would probably even encourage her to accept her aunt's offer.

But she knew it would hurt him. And knowing he was hurting would in turn, hurt her, as well.

Maude knew he would hide it, knew he would tell her that he wanted her to go, to live her life and chase her dreams.

It made her think of the conversation they'd had on the riverbank the day her parents died, and how he encouraged her to find a dream, to find the one thing she wanted more than anything else in life and to pursue it.

No doubt, he would recount that conversation to her, as well. But she knew he would be hurting. Deeply.

And she didn't know that she could bear the thought of hurting the only person in her life who hadn't ever let her down. Not once.

"It's just… what?" he pressed.

Maude let out a sigh, knowing that she had already opened the door and couldn't close it now. Not until she'd stepped through.

Edgar would hound her until she finally gave in and told him what it was. He had that persistent, dog-with-a-bone attitude.

"Aunt Tilda wants me to move to Boston," she finally admitted.

"She wants me to live with her. She says we're the only family we have left in the world and that she can't bear the thought of me living out here all by myself."

Edgar's face betrayed no emotion. He remained as stoic as ever,

but because Maude knew him so well, she could see the emotion churning behind his eyes.

He licked his lips and settled back into the chair, his eyes never leaving hers. “And what do you think?” he asked after a long moment of silence.

Maude shrugged. “I don’t know, really. I’m just a bit overwhelmed by it all right now. I mean, on the one hand, the opportunities I’d have there would be tremendous.

“Did you know women can attend schools there?” she asked him. “Actual universities, Edgar.”

“That could open a lot of doors for you,” he allowed.

Maude nodded, feeling the embers of that excitement burning inside of her. But she quickly tamped them down, not wanting to make him feel any worse.

“So you’re goin’ to go to Boston then, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I… I haven’t decided yet.”

He looked at her as if she had just grown a second head. “What’s to be decided? You’ve got a pretty darn good opportunity sittin’ there, just waitin’ for you to take it.”

While it was true that she hadn’t decided anything yet, everything inside of her was screaming at her to take the stagecoach to Boston. Or to wherever would allow her to get there.

Maude’s heart and mind, which were usually at odds with one other, were both screaming at her in unison that the opportunity

laid out before her was too great to pass up.

Although, they both did also acknowledge that leaving Edgar would be the most difficult thing she had ever done.

“What’s holdin’ you here, Maude? Mayfield’s a small town. It’s always gonna be a small town. And small towns don’t offer you the opportunities to learn and grow a place like Boston will.”

“You’re what’s holding me here, you big idiot,” she told him bluntly. “I honestly don’t know how I would’ve made it this far in life without you.

“Especially after this past year. And I sure as heck don’t know how I’d make it in Boston without you there givin’ me all your wisdom.”

His smile was faint, but warm. “I think you give me too much credit,” he said quietly.

“You’re a lot stronger than you ever give yourself credit for, Maude. You would’ve come through this past year just fine without me.”

“I don’t know about that,” she replied.

Edgar leaned forward in his chair and took her hand, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze. His eyes found hers.

“I do know. If you don’t believe anythin’ else I say, believe that. You’re the strongest person I know,” he said firmly. “And here’s what else I know.

“Mayfield’s too small for you anymore, Maude. You’ve outgrown

this town. I know you've got dreams you never had before. Desires you never knew you had. And I know for sure you ain't ever gonna fulfill 'em here."

"Edgar—"

He shook his head. "You've gotta go to a place like Boston to see those dreams you're havin' come to pass. To achieve those things you want to.

"A city like that has an ocean more opportunities for you than Mayfield's ever gonna have."

Maude's face warmed and her eyes started to sting as they welled with tears that she fought to keep from falling. She didn't think that bawling her head off exactly portrayed the image of strength Edgar seemed to think she had.

But Maude raised her gaze to his and found him looking back at her. His eyes were so intense, his sincerity in wanting nothing but good things for her etched into every feature of his face, that it tore her heart to pieces.

"What about you?" she asked softly.

"Me? There's no need to worry about me."

"But I do."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'll be fine. I'm sockin' away money. I'm gonna get that land and build me a homestead like I told you I was gonna do."

"That's if the states don't go to war."

He pursed his lips. “Even if they do, I reckon it’s only a matter of time before they sort it out and things go back to normal.

“Once they do, I’m sure they’ll get back to dolin’ out land for homesteads out west. And I’m gonna get me one.

“So, you see, there’s no reason for you to worry about me,” he told her. “I’ll be all right.”

Maude could tell he was saying what he thought she wanted to hear. But because she knew him like she did, she could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

He wanted Maude to believe what he was saying to her, but even he didn’t. Not just yet. The war between the states, which seemed a foregone conclusion at that point, could derail everything he had been working for.

“You have a chance at somethin’ really good, Maude—somethin’ you ain’t ever gonna get if you stay here. You know that.

“I hate to see you go, but I’m sure as hell not goin’ to be the reason you turn it down. I’ll pack you myself if I have to, but you’re goin’ to Boston. You’re gonna seize your dreams, and you’re gonna live an amazing life. Do you hear me?”

Maude looked down at her small, delicate hand in his large, callused one. It engulfed hers, and the warmth of his grasp made her heart skip a beat.

He was such a good man. A good friend. Maude didn’t know how she could leave him. But then, she didn’t know how she couldn’t, since everything he’d said was true.

Maude knew she had a chance to build a good, happy life. A life unlike anything she had dared dream of. And it was a chance she would never have in a place like Mayfield.

Her insides were in turmoil and her heart felt like it was shattering into more pieces than there were stars in the heavens above. The idea of leaving Mayfield, leaving all she had ever known, was terrifying.

But the idea of going to a place like Boston, where she could learn, a place where she could be a lady of society, and live out her dreams—heck, even discover new dreams to pursue—was exhilarating.

Edgar was right yet again. This opportunity was far too good for her to pass up. The decision hardening in her mind, she looked up at him and saw the smile on his face.

It was as if he already knew what she was going to say. And maybe he did. After all, he did seem to have an uncanny knack for seeming to be able to read her mind.

“Good girl,” he said. “And don’t worry, I’m goin’ to visit and I fully expect you to show me all there is to see in Boston.”

“You’d better,” she replied softly as the first tear tracked down her cheek. “And I will.”

5

Maude stepped off the train and onto the platform, grateful to feel solid ground beneath her feet once more.

After the last few weeks of traveling by a few different stagecoaches and then by two different trains, Maude almost flt like she had forgotten how to walk.

Thankfully, as she took her first halting steps, she found her legs still worked just fine and she was able to walk to the end of the platform where her bags were waiting.

And when she got there, she took a moment to marvel at the city stretched out before her eyes. Impossibly tall buildings lined the streets all around.

And they were made from brick and stone, which was unheard of back in Mayfield, where everything was made from wooden clapboard. Also unlike home, the streets in Boston were made from cobblestones, not just wide ruts of dirt and mud.

And the people. There were so many people that her eyes nearly popped out of her head. Maude had never seen so many people in one place at one time.

Not even if they gathered up everybody in Mayfield would they come close to matching the sheer number of people Maude saw just milling around the train station.

And they were all dressed in such finery that Maude felt as if she was wearing a dull and dingy potato sack. Maude had to admit, if only to herself, that being among so many people was intimidating.

“Miss Maude? Maude Harding?”

The voice startled Maude out of her reverie and she looked to her left to see an older, portly man in dark pants, with a dark vest, tie, and frock coat standing there.

He doffed his dark bowler hat to her and gave Maude a slight bow at the waist. His dark hair that was shot through with gray, he was clean cut and freshly shaved, and he had eyes the color of emeralds.

There was a dignified air about him, and since he knew Maude’s name, she could only guess that he was Aunt Tilda’s man.

She gave him a smile. “I am. And you are?”

“Atticus,” he replied, his voice thick with an Irish lilt. “You can call me Atticus. I’m Miss Matilda’s steward.”

“Well, it’s lovely to make your acquaintance, Atticus.”

He pointed to the bags and pair of trunks sitting on the platform next to her. “Is that all you have?”

“Umm, yes. That’s all I brought with me,” Maude said softly.

“That’s fine. I’ll get them loaded into the wagon for you.”

“Thank you,” she replied.

As Atticus took her smaller bags first, a small frown touched her lips. The way he’d asked if that was all she had made Maude feel as if she was a pauper without a stitch of clothing to her name.

She looked down at her homespun wool dress, which was drab gray, then cut a glance at the dresses of the women on the platform. They were all brightly colored, stylishly cut, and beautiful works of art, as far as she was concerned.

Atticus came back with a pair of big, strong-looking boys who hauled the pair of trunks with ease while he took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead.

Maude stood with the older man in an awkward silence for a moment until the boys returned. He gave them both a couple of coins and a word of thanks for their time.

Then, he turned to Maude with a wide, friendly smile that reminded her so much of Father Winston back in Mayfield that she felt a stutter in her heart.

“Are you ready to go, lass?” he asked.

Maude nodded. “I am.”

She followed Atticus to a waiting buckboard wagon and let him help her into the seat. The wooden frame groaned and the seat tilted almost dramatically to his side as Atticus climbed in and plopped down on the bench beside her.

He gave the reins a snap and set the horses in motion. The wagon rumbled over the cobblestones, making Maude feel like it was jarring every bone in her body.

She suddenly realized there was something to be said for the wide dirt roads in Mayfield. At least there she'd never felt like she was being shaken to pieces when riding in a wagon.

"How do ya find Boston so far, Miss Maude?" Atticus asked, his tone amiable.

She looked around, doing her best to shut out the sensation of being shaken apart, and took in her surroundings once more.

"It's… big," she said honestly. "And crowded."

He smiled. "It can certainly seem that way. You get used to it, though. Soon enough, it's gonna seem normal to ya."

Maude shook her head. "I'm not so sure about that. I've never seen buildings so tall, or so many people in one place."

"Believe me when I say it loses its appeal after time," he said with a hearty laugh.

Atticus was an affable man and despite having only just met him, Maude liked him already.

"What is my Aunt Tilda like?" she asked. "I only met her when I was a young girl and don't remember much about her."

A shadow darkened his face and a small frown tugged at his lips. He looked over at her, giving Maude a smile that she thought looked more sympathetic than anything.

His expression was strange and it sent a chill rushing down her spine.

“She’s an important woman. She’s a busy woman,” he said, his tone colder. “She can be difficult. But as long as you stay out from underfoot, you should be all right, lass.”

Stay out from underfoot? I’m not a child and don’t need to be hanging from her apron strings. I’m a grown woman, Maude thought.

She got the sense there was more that Atticus was not saying, either because he was afraid or because he was loyal to her aunt and didn’t wish to be a gossipmonger.

Maude found both possibilities unsettling.

They both fell silent for the rest of the ride to Aunt Tilda’s home, which was just beyond the city proper in the vast, lush countryside.

Maude gaped at the sheer size of her aunt’s home, thinking it looked like a palace. Atticus’ gentle laughter pulled her eyes back to him.

“It’s somethin’, eh?” he said.

She nodded. “It really is.”

“Like everythin’ else in this bloody city, its charms will wear off, lass.”

After what he’d said before, Maude was left to wonder if he was talking about her aunt… without mentioning her by name, of course. But then she thought back to the letters Tilda had sent to

her and decided he couldn't possibly be right about her.

When Tilda wrote to her, the letters were filled with nothing but joy and love… Maude had felt it through the pages.

Tilda seemed genuinely excited to have Maude come live with her. Her aunt had said that having family with her again would fill her heart with a profound sense of happiness she hadn't felt in some time.

As Atticus steered the horses up a long dirt road that led to the house, Maude decided that maybe she had misinterpreted what Atticus said.

She was in a new place, surrounded by new people who even spoke differently than the people back in Mayfield, so it already had her feeling slightly off-kilter and overwhelmed.

It was entirely likely that she had read into his words, or ascribed a meaning that wasn't actually there. Maude knew fear could do that to a person.

It could make them see things that were entirely innocent in an ominous and perhaps even sinister light. Maude was certain that had to be it.

He pulled the wagon to a stop in front of a staircase, then hopped down and came around to Maude's side. She let him help her down from the buckboard and when her feet hit the ground, Maude stared up at the large, white house.

Four tall, white columns stood sentinel in front, holding up a peaked portico that stretched out from the front door.

The house itself was made of red brick, with more windows than she had ever seen in one home, all of them adorned with white shutters that Maude found strangely fascinating. No home in Mayfield had shutters.

The front door opened and a tall, severe-looking woman stepped out onto the wide porch. Her hair was the color of gold, like Maude's, and pulled back into a tight bun atop her head.

She was tall and thin, with pale skin and dark eyes. Her nose was a bit long and pointed, reminding Maude of her mother's, and she had the same high cheekbones in her pinched, angular face.

As the older woman looked her over, the frown on her lips sent another rush of ice up Maude's spine.

Clearing her throat, Maude walked up the stairs and stood before the older woman on the porch. Her aunt stood a couple of inches taller than her, and looked her up and down, an air of distaste radiating from her like heat from a hearth.

Maude shifted on her feet, suddenly feeling apprehensive and self-conscious. But she quickly stuffed those feelings down and put a smile on her face.

This was family. She was finally home again.

"Aunt Tilda. It's really nice to see you again," Maude said and stepped forward to embrace her, but her aunt took a step back.

Tilda pursed her lips as she scrutinized Maude, clearly not approving of what she saw, and it left Maude confused. This was not the same woman who had put such care and love into her letters. She was about as warm as a snowstorm.

“While you are here, you will address me as Aunt, or as Matilda, which is my Christian name,” she snapped.

“We are not on the prairie, Maude, and you will not address me with such quaint, down home, familiar terms. I am a society woman of position and demand the respect of being addressed as such. Am I understood?”

Maude’s gaze fell to the ground and she automatically nodded, assuming a posture of deference.

“Yes, Aunt,” she said.

“Very good,” Tilda responded. “Then, come with me. Atticus will see that your things are taken to your quarters.”

My quarters. Like I’m some sort of a servant, instead of her niece, Maude thought bitterly. But she followed Tilda into the house, still impressed by the finery she was seeing.

Beautiful paintings and tapestries hung on walls that were made of a dark wood she had never seen before, and matched the floor beneath her feet.

They passed through what Tilda called a sitting room, a formal dining room, a parlor, and other rooms on their tour. She, of course, explained to Maude what each room was used for, and which rooms Maude was not allowed in.

Then, they entered the large kitchen and Maude saw four older women bustling about.

The air was redolent with a hundred different aromas that made her mouth water, and reminded her that she hadn’t eaten since

breakfast on the train - a bowl of thin gruel with cinnamon and slices of apple thrown in.

It had filled the gnawing void in her belly for a time, but standing there with the scent of roasted meat and a thousand other delicacies filling Maude's nose, her belly rumbled.

"I'm sure you've had a long, arduous journey to get here," Aunt Tilda said.

"I have, actually, and I—"

"Unfortunately, there is no time to rest just now. We have a dinner party tonight with some of Boston's most important people, and there is still much to do," Tilda cut her off.

"Josephine here will fill you in on your duties and what is expected of you. Do you understand?"

"Expected of me?"

Tilda looked at Maude with mild surprise on her face. "Why yes, of course. You didn't think you were going to be allowed to freeload here, did you, silly child?"

"No, of course not. It's just I thought about going to school and getting a job - "

"School? A job? Don't be absurd," Tilda interrupted. "Your duties are here. To your family. Now, get to work."

Tilda waved Maude off and looked over to a shorter, plumper woman with rosy cheeks and a scowl on her face.

“Josephine, get her a proper uniform and set her to work,” Tilda commanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” the plump woman replied, her voice colored with an Irish lilt like Atticus’.

Tilda looked over at Maude once more before making a noise of disgust in the back of her throat.

She turned and strode away, leaving Maude standing alone in the kitchen with four other women who were staring hard at her, looking like they wanted to throw her into the oven.

Josephine walked over and tossed her an apron. “Put that on. We’ve got work to do and we need all the hands we can get.”

Maude spent all night in the kitchen with Josephine and her three assistants. The hours were spent cooking and cleaning.

Well, since Maude had no experience in a kitchen, for her, it was mostly spent cleaning. She scrubbed pots, washed plates, and wiped down counters.

And never once did Aunt Tilda come in to check on her, to call her out for dinner, or to introduce Maude to her important guests. She left her there, slaving away like Maude was her hired staff.

By the time she fell into bed that night—and not a very comfortable bed, at that—she was exhausted. Bone-weary exhausted.

She was dirty, sweaty, and smelly, but she was too tired to care. It reminded Maude of Edgar after a day at the track factory, which made Maude laugh to herself.

As she lay there in the dark, she thought about him, missing him, wondering how he was doing. For the first time since she'd settled her affairs in Mayfield and signed her family home over to Edgar for safe keeping, Maude felt a strong sense of regret.

She never should have agreed to come to Boston in the first place. She should have stayed back in Mayfield, among everything and everybody she knew.

Maude tried to sniff back the tears, but they came anyway. Aunt Tilda's entire demeanor, so different from what was in her letters, felt like a cold slap in the face.

And it occurred to Maude in that moment that what Tilda had wanted when she'd asked Maude to come to Boston was not a niece. It wasn't a family connection.

It was a servant. Plain and simple. Tilda simply wanted another pair of hands to do the work for her. Maude felt that her aunt had played her.

Tilda had tugged on the right heartstrings and, like a master musician, sang the songs Maude so desperately wanted to hear. Songs she had longed to hear ever since her parents died.

Maude turned over and buried her face in the pillow, sobbing as quietly as she could, not wanting to be overheard. That was the last thing she needed.

Feeling like the loneliest person in the world, she couldn't stop the tears from coming. More than that, she felt like an absolute fool for listening to her heart in the first place. It had led her wildly astray.

As she sniffed back her tears, Maude realized she never should

have come to Boston.

6

The whistle blew, ending another day at the factory, and Edgar felt a dull pang of regret. The day had passed in a blur of tedious, mind-numbing work.

But that was what he needed right now. Shutting his brain off and focusing on the work, and nothing but the work, was what had gotten him through the last few days.

Hell, it had gotten him through the last few weeks and months since Maude had left.

Edgar needed the work, but he had already talked to Mr. Morgan, his supervisor, and was told there were no extra shifts to be had. Nobody could afford to miss work, apparently.

Not that Edgar blamed them. The money was good, but nobody knew how long it was going to last before it dried up.

With more towns popping up all over the Wyoming Territory as the push for statehood intensified, there was more competition than before.

Everybody was working as much and as hard as they could, both to

have some money to sock away, but also to hopefully keep the town from being passed over by other companies looking to put down roots.

Mayfield had to show it was a productive town with industrious people.

Edgar cleaned himself up a bit in the wash basin, then lit out for home. As he went, he passed by the schoolhouse and felt a sharp pain lance his heart.

He missed meeting Maude after school let out and walking her home. He couldn't deny that although he was excited for her and whatever grand adventure she was having in Boston, he was lonely there without her. He missed her.

Still, Edgar hoped she was getting everything she wanted and needed out there. He hoped she was chasing her dreams, catching them, and making new ones.

Now that she was free of her past and free of Mayfield, free to be who she wanted to be and to do what she wanted to do, Edgar hoped she was making the most of it.

She was a good woman and she deserved it.

But none of that meant he couldn't feel a bit sorry for himself for being left behind. It was tough kicking around town without her.

He was used to spending some time with her every single day, and being able to see or talk to her whenever he wanted or needed to.

Maude was a great friend and had meant so much to him that not having her around left a big hole in his heart that he didn't know

how to fill. He felt hollowed out and empty.

“Hey, Edgar!”

He turned to find Charlie walking up behind him, a wide grin on his face. He was covered in dirt, sweat, and grime, and Edgar could smell him from where he was standing.

“Jesus, Charlie.” he grimaced. “Ain’t been near soap and water in a while, huh?”

Charlie looked down at himself and frowned, then dusted off his pants and shirt, as if that was going to help. He flashed Edgar a grin, then shrugged.

“I’ll wash up later. Ain’t like I got anybody at home to impress,” he said.

“And it’s such a mystery why,” Edgar replied dryly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He chuckled. “It means women like a man who don’t smell like ten pounds of hot road apples.”

“Yeah, but when you find one who does, you know you got yourself a keeper.”

Charlie was always good for a laugh. Truth was, he was the only one who’d been able to get Edgar to even crack a smile since Maude left town.

Charlie looked pointedly at the schoolhouse, then back at Edgar. “You know she ain’t comin’ out those doors, don’t ya?” he asked.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Then why do you keep walkin’ by the school like you think she will? You can cut straight through town and shave ten minutes off your walk.”

Edgar shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess it just makes me remember the good times.”

“That so?” he asked and spit a glob of tobacco juice on the dirt at his feet. “Then why do you look so damn miserable?”

“I miss her,” Edgar replied honestly. “Guess I’m still gettin’ used to her not bein’ here.”

“But you two was just friends, right?”

“Yeah, of course. Known her since we were kids.”

“I only ask because you look like you’re mournin’ a lost wife or somethin’.”

“Nah. It’s not like that.”

Edgar turned and started to walk away, but Charlie fell into step beside him. The weight of the words he wasn’t speaking was palpable, as was his gaze.

Edgar knew Charlie wanted to tell him that he needed to stop moping around and be happy for her. She was off living a good life and being happy.

Charlie would say that should have been good enough for him. And that she wouldn’t want him shuffling around town, feeling

miserable and sorry for himself.

He'd tell Edgar she'd want him to find something that brought him some sense of joy and take hold of it. Like she had.

It was stuff Edgar had told himself a hundred times over already. He didn't need Charlie to remind him of it all. Again.

But the fact was, no matter how many times Edgar reminded himself of all that, and no matter how genuinely happy he was for her, it didn't diminish the sadness and loneliness he felt.

Edgar knew it was selfish as hell. He should be able to just be happy for her without feeling so sorry for himself.

But knowing something and doing something were two very different things entirely. And this was one of those rare cases when both things could be true.

"You know what'll cheer you up?" Charlie asked.

Edgar chuckled, knowing his answer already, since it was always his answer. "A beer over at McCarty's?"

"You're one of them mind-readin' fortune tellers, boy."

"Nah. You're just predictable."

He waved Edgar off with a good-natured laugh. "Either way, let's go. I know you ain't got anything better to do."

He was not wrong about that. There was literally nothing going on in Edgar's life that needed to be attended to right that minute, and hadn't been since Maude left.

Edgar knew he could go home and sit with his parents a while, but honestly, that wasn't much better than his other option, which was sitting in Maude's house alone.

Edgar's folks weren't much for talking. They weren't exactly social types, so Edgar might as well sit in silence as Maude's house as theirs.

At least going to McCarty's, which he'd been doing a lot more of since she left, took his mind off things.

It was always good for a few laughs, and by the time he went home with his head buzzing with drink, he didn't have to think much about anything and could just fall into a dreamless sleep.

"All right, let's go," Edgar said.

"Atta boy," Charlie replied and clapped Edgar on the shoulder.

It was getting late into the evening and Edgar had had a few more than he normally did.

He felt lightheaded and knew he was going to wake up tomorrow with a screamer of a headache. The constant pounding and hammering at the factory wasn't going to do him any favors.

Edgar looked at the cards in his hand and groaned. "Fold," he said, tossing his cards onto the pile of cash in the middle of the table.

"About time you got a bad hand," Charlie remarked.

"You ain't wrong about that," said Cyril, one of their poker friends.

Edgar shrugged. “I got a lucky streak tonight. What can I say, fellas?”

“Yeah, if luck was all there was to it,” grumbled Jeremiah, a newcomer to their game with a surly disposition.

Edgar flashed him a grin. “What else could it have been?”

Jeremiah fixed Edgar with a cold, dead-eyed stare and a snarl on his lips.

“Ain’t natural for a man to win what, five or six hands in a row like that,” he growled. “Ain’t nobody that lucky.”

“Apparently, I am.”

“Easy, boys,” Charlie said. “It’s a friendly game. No need to—”

“You don’t get cheated in a friendly game,” Jeremiah spat, his face darkening with anger.

“Nobody’s cheatin’,” Cyril said. “I’ve known Edgar for a long time, and if there’s one thing I can say with certainty, it’s that he don’t cheat.”

Edgar’s eyes flicked to the pair of six shooters in the holsters on Jeremiah’s hip. He looked like a man well accustomed to firing them, and it wouldn’t have surprised Edgar to find out he’d left a trail of bodies behind him.

Fighting had never been something Edgar enjoyed; he’d always avoided it at all costs. It wasn’t that he was yellow, it was just that he thought there were better ways to solve a problem than by shooting it out.

He didn't see the point in shooting a man over something as trifling as an unfounded cheating accusation. Taking a man's life didn't prove who was in the wrong or right of a situation—it just ended up with somebody dead.

Jeremiah, though, looked like a man who wanted to put a bullet through Edgar's head. The combination of losing money with too much whisky was fraying the man's nerves, making him more irritable than he was when he first sat down at the table.

The last thing Edgar wanted was for a fight to break out because Jeremiah was the kind of man who would fire first and ask questions later—if he bothered to ask questions at all.

"Look, I didn't cheat you. I don't cheat," Edgar snapped back. "But if it'd make you feel better, I'll give you back the money you lost. How'd that be?"

Jeremiah's face contorted with anger and he spat a thick glob of tobacco juice on the ground as he narrowed his eyes, glaring at Edgar.

"You think you're better than me or somethin'?" he sneered. "That what it is? You think you're better than me?"

"That's not what it is. It's tryin' to find a peaceful—"

"Oh, so you're yellow. That what it is, then? Well, since you're a coward, how about I take all your money."

Edgar felt the anger bubbling up inside of him. He was doing his level best to tamp it down. He didn't like fighting. At all.

But when Edgar felt backed into a corner and there was no other

way out, he would fight—and he would fight hard.

“You don’t want to push me, Jeremiah. Now, I gave you a fair deal. One I didn’t have to give. You lost fair and square. So I’d suggest you take it and move on,” Edgar said, his voice low and menacing.

The tension at the table grew thick as Jeremiah and Edgar glared at one another. Charlie cleared his throat and chuckled nervously.

“C’mon, fellas. Let’s just play some cards and have a few drinks, huh? No need for any of this.”

Edgar and Jeremiah were quickly reaching the point of no return and a fight seemed inevitable. Edgar didn’t want this. Fighting was the last thing he wanted to do today.

It was the last thing he wanted to do any day. But he wouldn’t stand there and be called a coward. Nor would he stand there and let a man take what was rightfully his.

Things were just about to boil over when the doors to the saloon banged open, crashing hard into the wall. A young man came in shouting, drawing everyone’s attention.

Something clearly had him all worked up and upset, but with so much conversation in the place, music from the piano in the corner, and general noise buzzing loudly in the saloon around, Edgar couldn’t make out what he was saying.

Thankfully, old McCarty himself took control of the situation and rapped a gnarled piece of wood against the bar several times. He usually used it to subdue unruly men, but as a call for quiet, it worked pretty well, too.

“Shut it, everybody. Shut it!” he roared.

For perhaps the only time in memory, the saloon fell silent, and all eyes turned to the young man in the doorway.

His face was red and he was out of breath like he’d just run across town. He looked at all the men staring back at him and suddenly seemed scared.

“Well? What is it, lad? If you’re gonna interrupt me bar, ya better have somethin’ useful to say. So, spit it out!” McCarty shouted.

“War! It’s war between the states,” the boy finally called out. “The southerners… they fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina! They’re goin’ to war!”

There was a moment of strained, hushed silence in the room, and then all at once, it exploded in excited conversation and cheering. Nobody was surprised, though.

Everybody had been watching this brewing from afar for a long while now. It wasn’t shocking that it had all finally boiled over. All the same, it was unsettling news.

So unsettling that even the conflict building between Edgar and Jeremiah was forgotten. Jeremiah got to his feet and walked away without another word.

They were not a state yet, so they were not involved with the conflict. But Edgar had a feeling recruiters from the Union would be making the rounds to drum up bodies willing to fight all the same.

The Wyoming Territory’s support for the war might even have

some bearing on its chances at statehood.

“Well, that’s interestin’,” Charlie said.

“Not the word I’d use, but yeah, it’s somethin’,” Edgar agreed.

“You goin’ east to sign up?” Cyril asked.

Edgar shrugged. “Not my fight. Nothin’ in it for me.”

But even as the words were crossing his lips, he realized that he could be wrong about that.

Just as the Territory’s support for the war could have some bearing on the statehood issue, Edgar’s personal support for it—meaning whether or not he enlisted—could have some bearing on whether he was eligible to get that homesteading land.

Edgar shook his head, hating the fact that his words to Maude so long ago were now proving to be right once more—life absolutely could change in the blink of an eye.

7

Maude collapsed on her bed, physically and mentally wrung out.

After a long day spent tutoring at the school just down the street, she'd had to see to her duties at the house, which included helping to make supper, cleaning up afterward, and then polishing the silver.

The only reason she was getting to bed before the small hours was that some of the other women in her aunt's employ had taken pity on her and pitched in to help with her chores.

It had taken Maude weeks to convince Tilda to let her take a job outside the home. It was only part time, but she felt that getting out of her aunt's house, even for a little while a few times a week, was the only thing keeping her sane.

Ever since she had come to live with her aunt, in what felt like another lifetime already, Maude had worked her fingers to the bone. She was just another servant, not treated like family in the least.

This wasn't what Maude had anticipated when she'd agreed to

come to Boston. She had expected to be welcomed into the loving arms of her family, a family who would care for her, and help her forget the tragedy that had torn her parents from her.

That was what Tilda had made her believe. But it had all been lies, a carefully crafted ruse to draw her to Boston, just so Tilda could have another housemaid.

One that she not only didn't have to pay, but earned a profit on, as well. As a condition for letting her accept the position as a tutor, Tilda forced Maude to hand over her earnings.

Maude was then given a small allowance from that money, but the rest went to what her aunt called "room, board, and general upkeep."

There were many nights Maude laid in bed, staring at the ceiling and plotting her escape. She often fantasized about going somewhere else. Anywhere else.

She could always go back to Mayfield to be with Edgar.

She reached up and touched the pendant on the necklace he had given her that day by the river. The day her entire life had changed.

Running her fingertip over the smooth surface of the opal, she fought back tears, knowing some small part of her would forever associate the necklace with the death of her parents. But the larger part of her would always cherish it.

Maude considered it Edgar's declaration of love for her. She considered it a promise from him, and she hoped that he would one day fulfill it.

They had never openly declared their love for one another, but between them, it was just known.

Maude often imagined what life would be like on the homestead he was so determined to get. She thought about building a life with him, perhaps even raising a family.

She thought she'd like to have a large family with him and often hoped that their children would take after Edgar. He was always so witty and clever. He could make her laugh, even when she was down.

But she knew it was only fantasy. The reality was that she couldn't leave Boston, even if she wanted to. She was trapped.

Shortly after she'd arrived, Tilda had searched Maude's belongings and confiscated the money she had brought with her. The money her parents had left her.

Maude had taken the job as a tutor with the hope of earning enough of her own money that she could afford to escape.

It would take her forever to save enough for a train ticket out of Boston with the pittance of her earnings she was allowed to keep. But Maude saved that pittance all the same, knowing it would add up over time.

As optimistic as she tried to remain, Maude knew the reality was that she would never be able to leave. Or, at least, not for a very long time.

She had no money. No way to get back to Wyoming, even if she wanted to. Though she wanted it to be otherwise, she knew she was stuck.

If she left, she would be living on the streets, penniless. And as terrible as things were in Tilda's house, at least Maude had a warm bed to sleep in and hot meals filling her belly.

It wasn't much, but it was better than the alternative. If only just barely.

A gentle knock on the door pulled her from her thoughts, startling her. She quickly jumped to her feet and checked herself over, patting down her hair.

Maude walked over to the door and opened it to find Mrs. Stewart on the other side. It brought a smile to her face. It seemed she was one of the only things that could make Maude smile these days.

"Good evening, Maude," the older woman greeted her.

"And a good evening to you, Mrs. Stewart."

Maude stepped aside, letting her in. Mrs. Stewart had been with Tilda for more than twenty years.

She ran Aunt Tilda's household now, and had been kind to Maude from the day she'd arrived. Maude was grateful to her for that.

She was a short, matronly woman with plump red cheeks and blue eyes that sparkled. Her iron-gray hair was always pulled back into a tight bun that sat atop her head, and Mrs. Stewart was sharp as a tack.

Maude had never seen anybody get anything past her.

Mrs. Stewart took a seat at the small table that sat in the corner of the room and Maude sat across from her. She reached out and

turned the lamp up, chasing away some of the shadows.

Mrs. Stewart favored her with a warm smile. “How are you doing, dear?” she asked.

“Exhausted,” Maude replied. “It’s been a long day.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Maude’s smile was a little sad. “It seems like it.”

“Well, I have something that might restore your good cheer.”

Maude perked up, curious as to what Mrs. Stewart had brought her. She hoped it was one of her lemon sweetcakes.

Maude had never tasted such a delight in all her life and she always made sure to snitch a second piece whenever Mrs. Stewart made them. She suspected the older woman knew that, but indulged her anyway.

From her apron, Mrs. Stewart withdrew an envelope and Maude cocked her head, her curiosity only growing. Nobody wrote to her and Maude could not fathom who the letter might be from.

She was profoundly grateful, though, that Mrs. Stewart attended to the mail—she knew if Tilda did, she may well have never seen this letter, whoever it was from.

The older woman slid the envelope across the table to her with a mischievous gleam in her eye. It was a letter, that much was clear, but from whom she did not know.

She picked it up and when Maude saw the return address, her

heart swelled until it felt ten times too large for her chest.

She was tempted to tear it open, desperate to read Edgar's words, to know how he was doing and how his life had fared since she left Mayfield.

But she wanted to do so in privacy. Not that she didn't trust Mrs. Stewart, but Maude wanted to savor Edgar's words while she was alone.

"Is that from your fella?" Mrs. Stewart asked.

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean… I honestly don't know what I mean," her voice trailed off as she tried to gather herself.

The older woman laughed softly. "Judgin' by the way your face lit up just now, I'd say it's from somebody you want to be your fella."

A shadow crossed Maude's heart and she looked away, willing the tears that were brimming in her eyes not to fall. But it was an effort.

She blinked and sniffed, taking a moment to collect herself, then turned to Mrs. Stewart with a shaky smile on her face.

"I thought that maybe, one day, we'd be together," she said. "But it didn't work out that way."

"What happened, dear?"

Her bark of laughter was sharp and bitter. "First, my parents died. And then I ended up here," she said.

"I gave up everythin' in Mayfield, includin' Edgar, because I

thought I was comin' to be with family who loved me. And that was somethin' I really needed right then."

Mrs. Stewart sighed and Maude looked down at her hands, wringing them together as her heart thumped hard in her chest.

"If I had known this is what your aunt had in mind…" Mrs. Stewart let her words trail off, the thought incomplete.

Short of writing to Maude directly to warn her off, there really was nothing she could have done to prevent what was happening.

Maude suspected that was why Mrs. Stewart had been so kind to her from the start—she perhaps felt guilty for the way Tilda was treating her.

"It's not your fault, Mrs. Stewart," Maude said reassuringly. "There's nothing for you to feel badly about.

"To be honest, I was so desperate for that family bond, I might not have listened anyway."

The older woman's smile was small, rueful, but she seemed somewhat mollified, at least. The last thing Maude wanted was for Mrs. Stewart to feel guilty over her predicament. It was all her own doing.

Maude idly reached up and touched her necklace, something she did when she felt scared or uncertain. It always brought her comfort.

Much in the same way Edgar always had.

"That's a beautiful necklace," Mrs. Stewart said. "Is it from your

fella?"

Maude didn't bother correcting her again. "It is. He gave it to me on my eighteenth birthday."

Her smile was gentle. "In my experience, a man doesn't give you a gift like that unless there's love behind it."

"There was. But it's all for naught," Maude said. "Like I said, I left him behind."

Mrs. Stewart pointed to the letter. "Seems to me maybe it's not all for naught. Seems like he's thinkin' about you too, dear.

"See what he has to say. You're young, child. Who knows what can happen?"

Maude frowned. "Even if he did still have feelings for me, with my aunt taking my wages, there would be no way for me to get back to Mayfield."

Mrs. Stewart gave her a gentle smile. "As they say, where there is a will, there is a way. If you two are meant to be together, you will make it happen. I believe that."

The older woman got to her feet and reached out, giving Maude a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before shuffling out of the room.

Maude waited until the door clicked closed before opening the letter, her heart fluttering like a hummingbird's wings in her chest. But Edgar's letter was dark.

Rather than reading declarations of love and words of how much

he missed her, Maude found that Edgar had written to her of his troubles.

His tone was downcast. The letter spoke of how difficult things were in Mayfield and how lonely he was.

But the thing that felt like a kick in the belly and cast a dark shadow of dread over her heart was that Edgar told her he was going to war.

Being in Boston, it was impossible for Maude to not hear about the tensions between the states, especially since Tilda often held dinners for the city's political types. It was all everybody had been talking about for a while now.

And when she'd heard the southern states had fired on a Union garrison in South Carolina, Maude had been afraid. Mrs. Stewart had assured her the war, such as it was, would be over quickly, and that they were quite safe all the way up in Boston.

She had eased Maude's nerves and Maude no longer feared that rebel troops would be kicking in their door anytime soon. But she had never once thought that Edgar would find himself mixed up in the conflict.

He told Maude that he was going simply because it would make him eligible to receive land to homestead from the federal government.

Because the Wyoming territory wasn't yet a state, those who resided within its borders weren't citizens of the country yet, and so would be left out of the land rush.

Edgar told her that because his service would entitle him to a

homesteader's plot, he had to go. If he waited until the Congress voted on statehood for Wyoming, he'd lose out on the prime land.

The thought of him going to war, of putting himself in that kind of mortal danger, terrified Maude. More than the physical violence, though, Maude worried about what it would do to him mentally.

Emotionally. Edgar was a man of peace. A man who found violence abhorrent. War, even more so.

If he were forced to fight, and to kill, she worried it would fundamentally change him as a person. He would no longer be that man she'd given her heart to.

She understood why he was going to join up. But, selfishly, she didn't want to lose her Edgar. More than that, she didn't want him to lose himself.

Maude grabbed a feather quill and an inkpot from a drawer and sat down at the table.

Though she was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed, she needed to return Edgar's letter. It was going to take some time for it to reach him.

She wanted to talk to him of her troubles and struggles here in Boston. If there was one person in this world who would listen and understand, it would be him.

But it seemed he already had so much to worry about. Even through his letter, she could practically feel the burden he carried upon his shoulders.

His words just seemed… sad. Resigned to his fate, perhaps.

So, Maude set about writing the most cheerful letter she could, which was difficult, considering her own burden and pressures. But she did not want him going off to war with a heavier heart than he already had.

She wanted to give him hope. Something to look forward to.

She told him that when he returned from the war, she wanted to see him. Told him that they would find some way to reunite.

Most of all, she told him to be safe and to come back to her.

It was the early hours of the morning by the time she fell asleep after all. But her letter was finished and she would ask Mrs. Stewart to drop it in the post tomorrow.

She just hoped it would reach Edgar before he left for the war.

8

Dawn's first light streamed down through the thick cloud cover above, patchy and diffused. A low mist hugged the ground and glowed vivid shades of orange and red, making it look as if the field was bloody and on fire.

Edgar thought the effect was eerie, to say the least. He leaned back against the fallen tree he sheltered beneath, trying to get comfortable on the ground.

Even though the fighting had ended at dusk yesterday, the air was still redolent with the odor of black powder. And death.

That was the one thing Edgar hadn't been able to get used to—the smell of death. He'd heard men talk about it before, but had never given it much thought.

At least, not until he'd smelled it on the battlefield himself.

When a man died, he usually loosed his bowels, and on these battlefields where dozens, if not hundreds of men died, that stench could be pretty overpowering.

It had been a long and mostly sleepless night. Their company

commanders had thought the rebels that sat across the field would launch a night attack.

But it had never come, and the only thing they'd lost was sleep.

Not that Edgar was doing much of that these days, anyway. He hadn't slept well since he'd first arrived in Philadelphia for his training and put on his uniform.

Fighting and violence were inherently against his nature. But he recognized the necessity of it, simply to secure his own future.

He wanted a good plot of land to build his ranch on. More than that, he hoped, one day, Maude would join him there. He hoped they would marry and raise a family together.

Though he'd never said it out loud, he loved her fiercely, and had since they were young. He couldn't picture a future without her.

Maude's leaving for Boston had torn a hole in his heart that he had never been able to fill. It was the biggest reason he'd enlisted in the Union army.

If he hoped to marry Maude, he wanted to be able to offer her something of worth. He wanted to be a man of value. And to do that, he needed land and a working ranch.

He fought with the Union, not because he was an ardent believer in the cause. Truth be told, he didn't much care about the issues they were fighting over one way or another.

Living out west like he was, it wasn't his concern. He didn't fight to preserve the Union, or any of those other lofty ideals men often spoke of.

He fought in this war to build his future. A future for him and Maude.

But with every week and month that passed, he grew a little more pessimistic about that future. He believed a little more that it wasn't going to come to pass.

With every engagement he fought, every life he took, Edgar felt himself growing colder. More detached. Fighting in this war was against everything in his nature.

He would be lying to himself if he didn't acknowledge that it was leeching a little bit of his soul away. The war was taking a heavy toll on him.

Edgar turned and poked his head above the log he was leaning against, looking across the open field. He could see the cookfires of the rebel troops across the way and hear the echo of their conversations and laughter.

He never understood how people could eat, not to mention laugh, knowing the day would undoubtedly bring more bloodshed and death.

His company had been tasked with protecting a Union supply line that was being used to funnel much-needed food and munitions to the front in Kentucky.

The Confederates had made a strong push of late, and the fighting down there had been fierce and relied on the supplies that flowed down this artery.

At first, Edgar had been relieved. Protecting the supply line didn't seem too dangerous of a job, and one in which violent conflict

didn't seem likely.

But then, yesterday, the rebels had just appeared, as if out of nowhere. They came rushing out of the trees on the other side of the field, and before Edgar and his company knew what hit them, they'd lost ten men to enemy fire.

Their commanders had quickly organized the company and returned fire. They had eventually managed to repel the Confederates, but had paid a heavy price for it.

By the time the smoke had cleared and the battle had concluded for the day, Edgar's company had lost eighteen men.

The only saving grace, according to his commanders, was that in the end, they had inflicted twice as many casualties upon the enemy.

Not that Edgar believed that killing thirty-six men was something worth celebrating.

"Letter for you, Corporal."

Edgar raised his head to see a boy who couldn't have seen more than sixteen summers standing over him, a Union dispatch bag over his shoulder.

His gaze drifted to the letter in the boy's hand and a sad smile touched his lips. Letters from home usually lifted his spirits, but in his current mood, bleak and filled with despair, he didn't think even the comforting words of his mother would help.

He took the letter from the boy and gave him a nod before sending him off. Opening the envelope, he felt his heart stop.

The handwriting was familiar to him, but it wasn't his mother's. His gaze shot down the page to confirm his thoughts and when he saw Maude's name, his breath caught. It was unexpected, to say the least.

He started at the beginning and read her words, savoring each and every one.

My Dearest Edgar,

I hope this finds you safe and well. It has taken some doing, finding out which company you are with and how to get a letter to you. But if this finds you, I consider it well worth the effort!

I received your letter previously, but by the time it arrived in Mayfield, you had already gone. Your mother wrote me back to tell me.

I have thought of you often since I left home and miss the times we shared. I still wear the necklace you gave me and rarely take it off.

It reminds me of better times, Edgar. Happier times. With you.

I miss our walks along the river, all our conversations, and even just the times we sat by the fire saying nothing. Your companionship never failed to make me happy, and I miss that dearly.

I hope that this cursed war is over soon and you can return home. I hope you are able to claim the land to start the homestead you have talked about for so long.

And I further hope that I will get to see you, Edgar. I hope it is not too bold to say, but there is a piece of my soul missing without you.

My most sincere hope is that once this war is over, you and I can find

each other again. I feel there is still much between us that has been left unsaid and undone.

My biggest regret is leaving Mayfield not having said or done those things, but I hope to have a chance to make amends.

Please stay safe and return to me. All my heart,

Maude

Edgar read through the letter more times than he could count, finding something new in her words each time. It filled his heart with a joy he had not known since he was with her in Mayfield.

“Must be a letter from a lass to have ya smilin’ like that, boyo.”

Edgar looked up to see his squad leader, Sergeant Gregory O’Malley, standing before him. He’d been so consumed reading and re-reading Maude’s letter that he hadn’t heard the big Irishman approaching.

O’Malley was tall and thick through the shoulders and chest. He had sparkling green eyes, red hair cut short, and a long, bushy beard the color of rust.

He was a man of hard muscle and an often belligerent demeanor. As Edgar’s squad leader, O’Malley could be tough; he was demanding and unyielding.

But Edgar respected him and liked him quite a lot. He knew the only reason O’Malley was so hard on them was because he wanted them to survive.

The sergeant handed Edgar a cup of coffee and a plate of food,

encouraging him to eat. Edgar accepted them gratefully and the Irishman sat down on the log and began to pick at his own meal.

“You might want to come down off that log. Them rebel sharpshooters—”

“Them rebel sharpshooters ain’t worth a piss, boyo. They couldn’t hit water if they fell out of a bleedin’ boat. If I thought they could, I wouldn’t be sittin’ here,” O’Malley said.

“Now. The letter. Who’s it from, lad?”

“It’s from an old friend of mine. From back home,” Edgar said.

O’Malley laughed. “A man smiles like that, those words are from more than just an old friend from back home. That’s the smile of a man who’s in love.”

Edgar laughed softly, then started to talk about Maude. He told O’Malley all about her and their life together back in Mayfield.

He talked for a long while, surprising even himself. Through it all, the sergeant just listened.

He smiled and looked at Edgar with a real and tangible sense of compassion in his eyes. It was the first time Edgar had ever seen that from the big Irishman.

“The way you talk ain’t the way an old friend talks either, lad,” O’Malley said. “Sounds to me like you’re carryin’ quite the torch for the lass.”

Edgar shrugged. “I suppose maybe I am. Maybe I have been all my life.”

“Well, then, sounds like you’ve only got one option open to ya.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“Survive this bleedin’ war,” he said. “Then, go marry that woman. Because if she’s half of what you described, that’s a fine woman. A rare woman.

“Any man would be lucky to have her, and if you don’t step up, some other man will.”

Edgar frowned and looked down at the ground beneath him, letting O’Malley’s words seep into his mind. On some level, he already knew what the sergeant was saying.

Maude was a rare woman indeed, and his heart belonged to her. And he had always been fairly certain that hers belonged to him, as well.

But he’d been too afraid to step up.

“Take it from me, lad, ya never want to pass up a woman like that. You’ll spend the rest of your life wonderin’ and kickin’ yourself for it,” O’Malley said.

“Been there before. And ya may only get one shot at that rare kind of love in your life. It’s up to you to seize it.”

Before Edgar could respond, the crackle of gunfire filled the air around them.

He and O’Malley looked across the field to see the rebels streaming out of the trees. Worse than that, the gray-clad soldiers were coming in from their left, as well.

“Bloody hell, they got around our pickets and flanked us,” O’Malley growled, then looked at Edgar. “To arms, lad. Grab your weapon and get to fightin’.”

As O’Malley dashed off to rally the men, Edgar jumped to his feet and grabbed his rifle, quickly loading it to prepare for action. His heart thundered in his chest and his entire body quivered with fear as the Confederates breached their lines.

It was a swarming mass of humanity, a churning, writhing wall of blue and gray colliding. Somewhere in that swirling mass, Edgar heard the call for bayonets and to prepare for hand-to-hand combat.

The shouted screams of men fighting, of men dying, filled the air around him, and Edgar’s stomach twisted itself into knots.

The fear welling within him was overwhelming. He had to fight the urge to turn and flee. But he stood his ground.

He was many things, but Edgar was not a coward, nor a deserter. His brothers in arms needed him and he would not abandon them.

Gritting his teeth, Edgar raised his rifle and fired a shot. He watched as a crimson blossom appeared on a Confederate soldier’s chest.

The man slumped to the ground and was still. Affixing his bayonet, Edgar charged into the fray.

He ducked the thrust of a saber, turning and driving the butt of his rifle into the face of the man with the sword.

When the man grabbed at him, his nose spilling blood down his

face, Edgar turned the rifle around and rammed the point of his bayonet into the man's chest.

Edgar ripped the blade out of the soldier, then turned and ran another one through. Over the din of battle, he heard the bellowed cry of Sergeant O'Malley, exhorting their forces on.

He glimpsed O'Malley in a throng of men, waving his arms and encouraging the men to fight on. But when he saw a graycoat slip up behind the burly Irishman, Edgar felt his stomach drop.

He shouted at the top of his lungs to warn the sergeant, but his voice was lost amidst the chaos. O'Malley couldn't hear him.

When the soldier fired, all Edgar could do was watch the spray of red burst out the front of his friend's body. O'Malley fell to his knees, a look of rage twisting his features as if he was angry at the bullet that had torn through him.

Screaming a wordless cry of fury, Edgar charged forward, driving the butt of his rifle and plunging the blade of his bayonet into anybody with a gray coat.

By the time he reached O'Malley, his breathing was ragged and he was covered in blood from head to toe.

The sergeant was face down in the dirt and wasn't moving. Heedless of the fight raging all around him, Edgar dropped to his knees and turned the fallen man over, looking into the Irishman's wide green eyes.

The sergeant was gone. Edgar felt a cold rage smoldering in his belly. He tightened his grip on his rifle, ready to cut a bloody swath through the rebels.

But then O'Malley drew a long, shuddering breath. His eyes came back into focus and he looked at Edgar, his expression contorted in agony.

"Get out of here, lad," he said, his voice raspy and dry. "The day is lost. Run, boyo. Run now."

"Medic! I need a medic!" Edgar cried out. "Somebody help me!"

As he gripped the sergeant's arm, Edgar became aware of his surroundings. The sound of the fighting was tapering off and the air was no longer saturated with the screaming common to battle.

Instead, it was filled with the moaning of the injured and dying. Edgar looked up to see men in gray coats standing over his wounded comrades, and when they fired at point-blank range, the groaning stopped.

It was then that Edgar felt the presence behind him. He turned around slowly to see half a dozen Confederate soldiers.

The nearest was a captain - the man who'd shot Sergeant O'Malley. The man was tall and lean with lank dark hair, narrow blue eyes, and a grizzled beard shot through with gray.

"Howdy. How ya doin', boy?" he asked. "Looks like we got the better of y'all today, huh?"

Edgar's eyes narrowed and he glared balefully at the Confederate captain. He moved to stand, but O'Malley gripped the cuff of his coat.

As near death as he seemed to be, there was still iron in the old Irishman's grip. Edgar looked down at him to find the sergeant

shaking his head.

Turning back to the captain, Edgar saw him nod to the man next to him, and the man smiled and stepped forward.

Edgar barely had time to register the butt of the soldier's rifle cutting through the air toward him before he felt the crunching blow to his temple. His head snapped to the right and his vision wavered.

And as he felt the ground rushing up to meet him, Edgar's whole world turned black.

9

"You're going to be all right," Edgar said. "Just rest."

"I'm goin' to die, lad. Ain't no shame in it," O'Malley replied morosely. "I'll have died fightin' for a good cause."

Edgar peeled back the bandage again and looked at the wound. It still seeped blood, but he thought it had slowed.

Over his time with the Union, he'd become somewhat adept at battlefield medicine. He was by no means a doctor, but he had learned to clean and bind wounds, as well as make a simple inspection and diagnosis.

As he looked at O'Malley's wound, Edgar saw that it wasn't as bad as he'd feared. He did not believe it was a mortal wound, which made him breathe a sigh of relief.

Still, he needed to keep it clean—cauterize it, if he could. If he didn't, the big Irishman might develop an infection, and if that happened, it might be the end of him.

Edgar knew it was infection and disease that killed most men, and he was determined that Sergeant O'Malley would not be one of

them.

Edgar looked around the large room they were being kept in. After the rebels had secured their position on the supply line, they had force-marched their prisoners until just after midday.

They had arrived in a small town they'd seized and were currently occupying. The Confederate captain had ordered all of the prisoners be locked into the cellar beneath the church that sat just off the town square.

Edgar hated that they'd left the supply line vulnerable, hated that more men were going to die because they had not managed to hold the line.

But, in the end, there had simply been too many rebel soldiers. They'd been overwhelmed, their picket lines swamped.

Knowing there was nothing more he could do out there, Edgar turned his attention to saving the men he could in the cellar with him.

"Water," Edgar called out. "I need water."

Somebody knelt down next to him with a bucket of water and when Edgar turned, he saw it was the dispatch rider. The young man who'd given him the letter from Maude. He looked scared. Terrified, really, but grateful to have something to do to take his mind off what was happening. Edgar gave him a nod of thanks.

"Fetch me some rags, son," Edgar said. "Cloth. As clean as you can find. I need somethin' to bind these wounds.

"And fetch me that lantern, too, and a metal spoon if you can find

it.”

“A spoon?”

Edgar nodded. “Yes, a spoon. Now go, son.”

As the boy rushed off to collect the supplies, Edgar said a silent prayer that he’d find them. Being in a church cellar, he thought the chances were good since churches rarely threw out anything, but he crossed his fingers anyway.

Edgar turned his attention to washing out the sergeant’s wound.

He’d seen that the bullet had passed through the man’s body, and as he examined the wound, he saw that it had cut through O’Malley’s side, rather than through something vital.

But he’d lost a lot of blood, and Edgar couldn’t discount the possibility that there were wounds inside his body that he couldn’t see.

Still, he could only do what he could. The rest was up to God.

Edgar used the ladle to wash away the blood and grime around the wound. O’Malley groaned, his face twisted with pain.

The boy arrived with cloth that was tattered and definitely not sterile, but it would have to do. With the wound as clean as he was able to get it, Edgar heated the spoon over the flame from the lamp.

O’Malley’s eyes fluttered open and locked onto Edgar’s. He reached up and took hold of Edgar’s wrist and shook his head.

“Leave me, lad,” the Irishman said.

“I won’t.”

“I’ll either live or I won’t,” he replied. “Leave me.”

Edgar had seen so much death already that day that even one more seemed too much to bear. He was not going to let anybody else die if he could help it.

The head of the spoon in his hand was glowing and he felt the heat through the cloth he’d wrapped around the handle. It was ready.

“This is gonna hurt, Sergeant.”

Gritting his teeth, O’Malley gave him a curt nod. Edgar pressed the spoon to the sergeant’s flesh with a sound like bacon sizzling on a hot stove and a stench Edgar knew he would not soon forget.

O’Malley’s face was red and tight, the veins in his neck were stretched taut, and a long, loud moan passed his lips. The Irishman’s eyelids fluttered and then closed again.

“Help me roll him over,” Edgar said.

The boy knelt down and helped Edgar turn O’Malley onto his side. Working quickly before the sergeant woke up again, Edgar heated the head of the spoon once again and cauterized the wound in his back.

When he had finished, they laid him gently onto his back and covered him with a tattered old horse blanket, trying to make him as comfortable as they could.

“That’s all we can do for him, I’m afraid,” Edgar said quietly. “He’s in God’s hands now. Say a prayer for him.”

As he got to his feet, he looked around. Of their company, there were maybe twenty left. The Confederates had cut them to ribbons.

Most bore wounds of some sort, and all sat with their backs against the wall of the basement, looks of disbelief and grim resignation on their faces.

They were prisoners of war, and they had all heard the stories of what Johnny Reb did to the prisoners they took. The mere thought of what might be in store for them sent a chill racing down Edgar’s spine.

The door to the cellar was slammed open, sending a thick shaft of light into the gloomy, dim chamber. Three Confederates, weapons at the ready, came down first.

Nobody moved. A moment later, the captain who’d shot Sergeant O’Malley came down, surveying the battered, beaten men arrayed on the floor with a grim smile on his face.

“My name is Captain Grant Landon and we’re with Morestead’s Kentucky Rangers,” he said. “And as of now, I am your new god.

“Please me and y’all may be rewarded. Displease me and y’all may be killed. Do y’all understand?”

Nobody said a word. Nobody even looked at him. Nobody except Edgar. Landon looked back at him, an arrogant smirk on his face.

He walked over and stood before Edgar, looking him up and down, and the expression on his face suggested he was not impressed by

what he saw.

“You have somethin’ to say to me, Corporal?” Landon asked.

Edgar looked at him defiantly for a moment, but then lowered his eyes as the anger within him melted away like snow beneath the sun.

He knew the captain held his life in his hands and in that moment, with the weight of Maude’s letter in his pocket, he wanted nothing more than to live. To return to her.

“I remember you,” Landon said. “How’s your friend there? He dead yet?”

Edgar said nothing, keeping his gaze lowered.

He heard the sharp crack of flesh meeting flesh ringing in his ears a moment before he felt the sting in his cheek. His head snapped to the side and his mouth filled with the coppery taste of his blood.

Landon followed that by driving his fist into Edgar’s stomach. His breath exploded from him in a whoosh and he fell to his knees to the sound of Landon’s laughter.

“Get him up,” he heard Landon say.

A moment later, he was seized roughly and hauled to his feet. He continued to gasp and wheeze as he tried to catch his breath.

Edgar raised his gaze to see Landon heating the head of the spoon over the lamp again. One of the men holding him tore open his shirt with a low chuckle.

Landon simply kept the head of the spoon over the flame, his eyes never leaving Edgar's. "I think I need a demonstration to reinforce my words," he said.

"I want to make sure you and all your Yankee friends believe what I say when I tell you that I'm your new god."

Edgar's stomach roiled and churned, and his heart started to race. Sweat trickled down his back and beaded upon his brow. He struggled against the men holding him but couldn't break their grip.

Edgar felt the eyes of everybody in the cellar on him. The fear wafting off them was so thick, he could practically smell it.

Laughing low to himself, Landon stepped forward, but Edgar couldn't take his eyes off the head of the spoon, which was glowing an angry red color. The grip on his arms tightened as Edgar struggled, but he could not break free.

And then the spoon was on him, searing his flesh. The odor of his own skin cooking filled his nose and the pain that racked his body was more intense than anything he'd experienced before.

Edgar's scream of sheer agony shattered the air around them. But Landon kept the spoon to his skin, pressing it down even harder onto his chest, a light of glee in his eyes.

The louder Edgar screamed, and the harder he thrashed against the men holding him, the more Landon laughed.

And nobody in the cellar, none of his men, stood in his defense. Nobody spoke up. None of them even moved.

When the spoon grew too cool to burn anymore, Landon dropped it to the ground and nodded to his men, who released their hold on Edgar. His body still racked with pain, his legs gave out and he fell, landing on all fours.

His breath was ragged and darkness crept in at the edges of his vision, threatening to pull him under. He fought it off, staying conscious through the sheer force of his will.

Edgar managed to struggle back to his knees and glare at Landon, who simply smirked at him.

“How’d that feel?” Landon asked. Edgar remained silent, which only made the captain laugh again.

He signaled to his men and they filed out of the cellar. Landon kept his eyes on Edgar as he walked backwards, then moved carefully up the stairs.

“If I remember, I’ll toss you boys some food later,” he said just before disappearing through the door.

The slamming of the doors echoed through the cellar and Edgar listened to the chains rattling as they were strung through the handles.

His chest feeling as if it was still on fire and pain gripping his entire body tightly, Edgar slunk to a corner and sat down with his back to the wall.

He kept an eye on O’Malley, who was still deep in the throes of unconsciousness. Edgar envied him that.

He looked around at the men in the cellar with him. All of them

were huddled in on themselves, looking for all the world like whipped dogs.

The stench of fear and misery in the cellar was overwhelming, and an ember of anger smoldered inside of Edgar.

That his company, or what was left of it, hadn't stood up for him, hadn't tried to fight back in any way, filled him with fury. They had simply given up.

But Edgar tried to bite back his emotions, tried to retreat into a cold, dark place and divorce himself from how he felt. He tried to understand their position, to have some sympathy for them.

The last thing they wanted to do was draw attention and turn Landon's brutal torture upon themselves. In their place, Edgar didn't know if he would have done anything differently.

He wanted to believe that he would have stood up for them, but when it came down to it, he wasn't sure that he could have.

Slipping the letter out of his jacket pocket, he carefully unfolded it and read Maude's words over and over again. They were the only thing that brought him some sense of comfort in this increasingly dark world.

10

Maude stood at the windows in the front room, distracted from her duties by her thoughts once again. She stared out at the street while her mind continued to spin as wildly as her emotions.

“Wake up, girl. Stop standing there, daydreaming,” Tilda snapped, clapping her hands to get Maude’s attention. “You have work to do. I have guests coming tonight.”

She turned and looked at her aunt, no longer caring enough anymore to be outraged by the way Tilda spoke to her.

Over the years, Tilda’s treatment of her had worn Maude down. She treated Maude worse than the household staff, always insulting her and berating her for this or that.

It seemed the longer Maude remained in her aunt’s house, the worse Tilda treated her.

“I apologize, Aunt Matilda,” Maude said automatically.

“Get your head out of the clouds, girl,” Tilda sneered. “Focus on the important things, like your chores.”

“Yes, Aunt Matilda.”

Her aunt stood in the doorway, glaring balefully at her, for a long moment before turning and stalking off. Maude looked down at the feather duster in her hand and felt the frown creasing her lips.

The sadness inside of her was so thick that it was almost suffocating and she found it hard to breathe.

She walked listlessly around the room, running the duster over surfaces and objects without any real care for whether or not it was actually cleaning anything.

She was simply going through the motions. Maude didn’t care if her aunt’s guests saw dust around her sitting room or not.

After she’d sent her letter to Edgar, Maude had let herself dream of the life they could be having together. She’d fantasized about living out west, on his ranch.

She’d allowed herself to daydream about it, and always took some comfort in the fantasy. It was one of the only things that had brought her any sort of happiness in her aunt’s home, in this life that she hated so much.

But it was a life she endured simply because at the end of the day, Tilda was family. The only family she had. And Maude had nowhere else to go.

It had been several years since she had written to Edgar and hadn’t received a reply. She had finally written to Edgar’s mother, hoping for some word of him.

She needed to find out if anybody knew where he was, or what

was happening to him. Maude had never been so worried in her life.

At least, she hadn't been, until she'd received a reply from Edgar's mother, Anna. The War Department had informed Anna that Edgar had been taken prisoner by the Confederates somewhere in Kentucky.

Nobody knew where he was or what had happened to him. Nobody could tell her whether he was dead or alive.

And that was what was killing Maude—the not knowing. She felt trapped in limbo, unable to think of or plan for a future with him, but unable to let go of the idea, either.

Though on some level she knew the chances were good that Edgar was dead, she was having a hard time accepting it. But she knew she needed to find a way to do so if she didn't want to remain stuck in this purgatory for the rest of her life.

Finished with the sitting room, Maude meandered through the other rooms on the first floor, doing a cursory dusting. She couldn't stop the thoughts that were firing through her mind.

No matter how she tried to distract herself or focus her thoughts elsewhere, they kept returning to Edgar, to her worries for him and the grief of knowing he was likely lost to her forever.

Mixed in with all of that, Maude couldn't stop herself from wondering about her future. On that issue, her mind was divided.

Part of her believed that no matter what, no matter how badly Tilda treated her, she was still family—the only family Maude had. And because of that, Maude felt obligated to stay.

It was insane, she knew. It was more than apparent that Tilda saw her as one of her maids and nothing more.

In most ways, she treated Maude worse than her household staff. But for some reason, Maude couldn't help but feel guilty when she considered turning her back on her aunt and leaving her home.

Her parents had ingrained loyalty to family into Maude from an early age, and she couldn't just shake that off so easily.

On the other hand, the longer she stayed, the angrier she grew. And Maude knew she did not want to remain in her aunt's home as long as Mrs. Stewart had. She didn't want to look back on her life with nothing but regret.

Not that Mrs. Stewart felt regret, necessarily, but Maude did not want to get to the woman's age and know that she had lived her entire life serving somebody else. Somebody who didn't appreciate her in the least.

Maude wanted more out of her life than that. She wanted adventure. She wanted stability. A home. A family. She wanted to live a life full of love and happiness.

She wanted a husband who cherished her as she cherished him, children to fill their home with laughter. And she knew she would not get those things in Boston. Or, at least, not in her aunt's home in Boston.

To get out of her aunt's home, though, she would need to find a man who wanted to court her. That was all the more difficult given the fact that Tilda rarely let her out of the house.

It was impossible to meet a suitor when you never got to go

anywhere people gathered socially. The only time she was able to meet a man was when Tilda entertained.

Her aunt entertained quite often, and there was no

All of that combined to make Maude feel a deep and abiding depression. The dark tendrils of her grief and her fear wrapped themselves around her and squeezed her tightly, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Her chores done—probably not to her aunt's satisfaction, but at the moment, she didn't care—Maude made her way into the kitchen to start helping with the preparations for Tilda's guests.shortage of wealthy, eligible, and even handsome men who passed through Tilda's home.

But they all looked at her as if she was one of the servants in her aunt's household, rather than Tilda's niece. They seemed to think she was somehow unworthy of their attention, beneath their notice.

"Are you all right?"

Mrs. Stewart's voice snapped Maude out of her thoughts and brought her back to the present. She looked up to see the older woman standing over a large cookpot.

Steam curled out of the pot and drifted upward, and the entire kitchen was saturated with a dozen different aromas.

"Yes. I'm fine," Maude said.

"You don't look fine," Mrs. Steward replied. "You look wrung out. You also look like you need to eat something."

Maude gave her a small smile. “I’m fine. Truly.”

“I don’t think you are. Come take a seat.”

“Really, Mrs. Stew—”

“I wasn’t askin’, girl,” the older woman said. “Now, come take a seat.”

Maude shuffled over and took a seat on the stool next to the stove where Mrs. Stewart was cooking. The older woman dished up a large bowl of the stew she was making and set it down in front of her.

Sarah, one of the other scullery maids, set a plate with some fresh, warm bread down, as well. Maude gave them both a smile and offered her sincerest thanks.

She spooned a bite of the rich broth into her mouth and savored the flavor. As she ate a bit more, Maude realized she was hungrier than she’d thought.

She tore a piece of bread in half and dipped it into the stew before popping that into her mouth, next.

“How long has it been since you last ate, Maude?”

She looked at the older woman and shook her head. “I don’t know, to be honest.”

“Why are you running yourself ragged like this? Not eating, working your fingers to the bone… are you trying to kill yourself?”

“Of course not.”

“You sure could have fooled me with the way you’ve been grinding yourself down lately, Maude.”

She spooned some more stew into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully for a moment. She didn’t speak about her thoughts or feelings very often.

Maude was a private woman by nature and being in this house, with an aunt who ran her down and belittled her constantly, had only made her shut down even further.

Mrs. Stewart had been Maude’s only solace. In those rare times she did need to talk, it had been the older woman who’d been there to listen. Who had offered sage advice.

Maude appreciated that about her more than she could say.

“I’ve just been feelin’ out of sorts for a little while now,” she admitted.

“I don’t think I need to tell you I know why you’re feeling so unsettled.”

Frowning, Maude looked down into her bowl of stew. She didn’t know how to reply, simply because they had talked about Maude’s situation so many times before and had never come to a feasible solution.

There was no easy answer to be had. She felt caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

“I know how terrible this is going to sound, and I hope you will forgive me for my directness, but you’re waiting for something that may not come to pass,” Mrs. Stewart said.

“I don’t want to upset you, but you can’t stop your entire life for a man who may or may not be alive.”

Maude’s hand unconsciously moved to the pendant at her throat, stroking the smooth stone with the pad of her finger.

“And I hate saying something that sounds so callous and cold, but the chances are, your fella is gone, Maude,” Mrs. Stewart said, a note of regret in her voice. “Prisoners of war often don’t—”

“Please, don’t say it,” Maude begged. “I’m aware of what happens to prisoners of war, and I know you’re right about him.

“But I’ve been holding onto that dream of mine for years now. I don’t know how to function without it.”

The older woman gave Maude a sympathetic and patient smile.

“Oh, I think you’ll be able to figure that out, dear. The wonderful thing about dreams is that you can have new ones every night.”

“But what if I don’t want a new one?” Maude worried. “A life with Edgar was all I ever wanted.”

“If you can’t conceive of a world without him, if you’re willing to close yourself off to life and the possibility that you could love or find happiness again, then you’re no better off than your aunt, Maude,” Mrs. Stewart pointed out.

“I think Aunt Tilda seems plenty happy. This house is always filled with people who are enjoying themselves and making merry.”

“True. They are. But have you ever stopped to ask yourself why your aunt is always so angry? Why she always seems so bitter?”

the older woman replied.

“It’s because she’s not happy. Not really. But she’s a society woman, so she entertains and puts on a show of things.

“She acts the way a woman of her standing should. Deep down, she’s very unhappy. She’s simply going through the motions for the benefit of those she hosts here.”

Maude studied the older housekeeper. “How do you know this?”

Mrs. Stewart favored her with a smile. “When you’ve been with somebody day and night for twenty years, you get to know an awful lot about them.

“Maybe even more than they know about themselves,” she added.

Maude finished the last of her stew and wiped her mouth on the napkin, thinking of all Mrs. Stewart had just told her.

Everything she’d said about seeking out a new dream sounded fine to her, but Maude didn’t know how to go about making that a reality. And the more she thought about it, the more impossible it sounded.

She shook her head sadly. “I have little money,” she said. “I have no prospects for finding a suitor who can pull me out of this and help me live a new dream.”

Mrs. Stewart reached over and took her hand, giving it a firm squeeze. Her eyes bored into Maude’s, an earnest intensity in the older woman’s gaze.

“Listen to me, Maude, and listen closely.” Mrs. Stewart’s voice

burned with the same intensity as her eyes. “You’re a smart girl.

“There is nothing any suitor can do for you that you can’t do for yourself. You just have to find the courage to stand on your own two feet and make your dreams a reality.”

Mrs. Stewart held her gaze for another moment before letting go of her hand, satisfied that her point had been made. Maude sat back and thought about it.

The money she’d been saving over the years didn’t amount to much. Certainly not enough to buy her own home, or general store.

She fancied the idea of owning a store like her parents had, and thought about it often. It was a way of honoring their legacy, and being a woman in business for herself was something that appealed to her.

To do that, though, she needed money. A lot of it. And she needed to learn how to run a business.

Maude knew she was a smart woman, smarter than some of the supposed intellectuals who held salons in her aunt’s sitting room.

But she was also smart enough to know there was a difference between being intelligent and understanding anything about business.

“You need to go, Maude. You need to strike out for yourself,” Mrs. Stewart said.

“You’re a resourceful, intelligent young lady, and the world could be your oyster if you had the courage to follow your heart. Figure

out what it is that will make you happy and then, figure out a way to make that happen."

Maude was just about to reply when one of the other maids burst into the kitchen, her face flushed, out of breath, as if she'd just run a great distance.

Maude and Mrs. Stewart looked over at her, surprised.

"What is it, girl?" Mrs. Stewart snapped. "You look a fright and you scared us half to death, charging in like that."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Stewart," Cathryn said. "But I wanted to bring you the news."

"What news?"

Cathryn's smile was wide. "The war is over. The South surrendered," she cried. "General Lee just signed the surrender at Appomattox. Isn't that wonderful?"

Cathryn threw herself into Mrs. Stewart's arms and Maude watched as the two women laughed and embraced each other.

It truly was good news. With the defeat of the Confederacy, perhaps now the country could begin the work of healing and rebuilding.

In light of the conversation she'd just had with Mrs. Steward, Maude thought it somewhat serendipitous, in a fashion.

The day the country closed a chapter on a turbulent past and began to build a better future for itself, she found herself presented with the same challenge.

For the first time in a very long time, Maude felt a small spark of hope bloom inside of her—small and fragile, barely smoldering, guttering and on the verge of going out.

But it was there, all the same.

Maude knew it was up to her to breathe life into it. She just needed the conviction and courage to do it.

But even as she gave thought to moving forward with her life, it wasn't without a pang of trepidation.

With the end of the war, Maude might finally learn what had become of Edgar, and whether he was still alive. Or not.

11

The early mornings were the worst. His joints were stiff and his body ached more in the dawn's often bitter cold.

With a cup of coffee in hand, Edgar stood on the porch of his family home back in Mayfield, still in shock that he was actually there.

Locked in that cellar beneath the church, he'd never thought he would ever again be standing where he was, seeing what he was seeing.

It had been several months since the end of the war, since Captain Landon had told them that although he was tempted to kill those who remained, he was a gentleman.

He would abide by General Lee's order to give all prisoners of war quarter and safe conduct home, he'd said. Edgar's laughter was bitter.

If only Captain Landon had truly been a gentleman who showed that kind of restraint, there might have been more than four of them who'd survived his custody and walked out of that church cellar.

That Sergeant O'Malley had lived was the only positive thing Edgar could associate with his time in captivity. The tough old Irishman was a fighter and their parting had been an emotional affair.

They had become like brothers in the camp. Perhaps even closer than kin, bonded by their shared pain and suffering, by their anger as they had watched man after man in their company be tortured or put to death, just for the captain's amusement.

The screen door behind him banged shut, the sound sharp and loud. Edgar jumped, dropping his mug of coffee onto the porch, and spun around, his eyes wide, a wild snarl upon his lips, his fists raised and ready.

Edgar's body was coiled tight and he was ready to strike out at his attackers. All around him, he saw soldiers, saw the captain's face.

The fear that washed through Edgar was suffocating. His vision blurred and all he could think of was that he needed to fight to survive.

"Edgar. Edgar," a woman's voice cut through his thoughts. "Edgar, dear, it's all right. It's all right, honey."

It took a few moments of her gentle consoling, but he slowly started coming back to himself. His vision gradually cleared and he found himself standing before his mother.

Her expression was filled with concern and she clutched his fists tightly. Ever so slowly, Edgar's fear subsided and the near panic that had gripped him loosened its hold.

He was left breathing heavily, sweat dotting his brow and spilling down his back, making his shirt cling to his skin uncomfortably.

“I’m sorry, dear,” his mother said. “I forgot about the door. That was my fault.”

“I—it’s all right, Ma,” he said, his voice shaky. “It’s nobody’s fault. I—I’m sorry I’m so jumpy.”

Her smile was patient and a little sad. “That’s not your fault either, Edgar. It’s just somethin’ we’re goin’ to have to learn to overcome. Together.”

“Wish Pa felt the same way.”

His mother’s smile faded, replaced by a small frown. Edgar’s father had been distant since Edgar had returned; he gave Edgar a wide berth and never seemed able to be in the same room with him.

That was all right with Edgar, as he didn’t like being around people all that much anyway. But he couldn’t lie and pretend the fact that his own father couldn’t even look him in the eye, much less have much of a conversation with him, didn’t hurt.

“I’m sure he’ll come around, Edgar. Just give him a little time.”

“Sure. It’s all right.”

His mother pulled him into embrace and Edgar let her hold him. It seemed to do more for her than it did for him.

When he had arrived home, she had been overjoyed—after a fashion, anyway.

The last she’d heard was that Edgar had been taken prisoner. And when he’d come walking down the road, she had stared at him as if she was looking at a genuine, back-from-the-grave ghost.

She'd been terrified at first. But when she saw that he was real, that he was alive and that she wasn't actually losing her mind, the tears had started to flow and she had embraced him tightly.

It was then, during that first embrace, that Edgar realized he didn't feel much of anything. Physically, yes. He was aware of the feeling of her embracing him.

But inside? There wasn't much. There was no joy. No relief. No sense of comfort.

There was little more than a gaping void where there had been so much feeling before.

"I'm goin' into town for the day. Got some things to do," his father said, and both Edgar and his mother gave a start at the sound of the man's voice.

He'd slipped out of the house so quietly and shut the door so softly, they hadn't heard him come out. Edgar met his father's eyes briefly, but then the older man looked away.

"Why don't you take Edgar into town, Winston?" his mother suggested, but Edgar could see that his pa didn't want Edgar going with him into town with him any more than he wanted to go, himself.

Edgar didn't believe his father's avoidance of him was because he didn't love him anymore. He didn't even think it had to do with how Edgar had changed, or that he was… broken.

Instead, Edgar thought his father's reluctance to emotionally embrace him was because his father had already mourned him. His father had already made peace with his death and had closed

himself off to the hurt of losing his only son.

In his father's mind, Edgar thought, he had buried him and moved forward. And now that Edgar was back, his father was having a hard time reopening the doors inside of his mind and heart.

When you accepted the death of a loved one and mourned that loss, it was tough to unring that bell and go back to embracing them once again. Simply by doing so, you opened yourself up to having to possibly feel that pain all over again.

So, the way Edgar saw it, his father's avoidance of him wasn't out of callousness or lack of care. It was because his father loved him and never wanted to experience the pain of his loss again.

That made sense to him. He understood it.

"I'm not really feelin' up to goin' into town, Ma," Edgar said.

His father gave him a tight smile, but Edgar didn't miss the look of relief that briefly crossed his face.

Maybe they'd be able to get past this and be a family again at some point. Maybe not.

Edgar had felt ambivalent about everything and everybody since leaving that Confederate hellhole behind. It was as if somebody had reached inside of him and pulled his emotions out of him, leaving behind nothing but an empty husk.

Captain Landon seemed to have burned all the emotion out of him.

"All right. I'll see you both soon, then," his father said.

Edgar watched his father head off to the barn. A few moments later, he drove the wagon out and headed down the road, bound for town.

His mother favored him with a small, hopeful smile. “Why don’t you come on in, Edgar? I’ll make some breakfast—”

“Thanks, Ma, but I’m not very hungry,” he replied. “I think I’m gonna go for a walk. Get a little air.”

She nodded and gave his hand another squeeze.

“All right, dear. I’ll make sure to have something for you to eat when you get back. You need to eat. You need to keep your strength up.”

“Thank you, Ma.”

Edgar turned and walked down the porch. Rather than follow the road, he decided to stroll through the orchards that filled the southern fields of his family property.

As he walked, he breathed deeply, inhaling the aroma of apples that saturated the air around him. The ground was soft beneath his feet and the air was cool upon his skin.

The truth was, after being stuck in that cellar for as long as he was, he didn’t like being cooped up indoors much anymore. He preferred to be out in the open, breathing free air with no walls constraining him.

It was the closest he got to feeling an absence of the fear that consumed him. It wasn’t happiness, or anything remotely close to it, but it was something that wasn’t so all encompassing and

negative.

Under the wide-open sky, Edgar felt free. As strange as it sounded, since it seemed to be man's natural condition, it was a feeling he was still trying to adjust to.

Edgar's path led him through the orchards and down to the banks of the Double B river. The earthy musk of the forest and the riverbank was like a balm for his soul.

It helped soothe his frayed nerves, but the relief never lasted. It was never long before that dark, oppressive feeling returned, pressing down on him so hard it became difficult to breathe.

But outside, at least for a brief span of time, that feeling relented. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Edgar lived in such a state of fear and hypervigilance, he welcomed those brief respites.

Standing on the riverbank, he watched the early morning sunlight sparkle off the surface of the lazily flowing water. He turned to his left and looked at the lake, at the low mist that hung just above the surface, glowing pastel shades of red and orange.

It reminded him of the battlefield just before he and his company were routed and he was taken prisoner, sending a shudder through him.

Edgar kicked at a small stone near his boot, pushing away the dark thoughts and the fear that crowded his mind. He looked from the lake to the town of Mayfield in the distance, marveling at how much it had grown and changed in his absence.

In just a few short years, Mayfield had doubled in size. As the possibility of statehood grew, people were flocking to his hometown.

They had even built a train stop, putting it well on its way toward being one of the Wyoming Territory's larger cities, and throwing it in the mix to possibly be named the capital whenever it achieved statehood.

Edgar turned back to the river and breathed deeply, willing himself to be calm again. As he tried to push away the darkness, he let his mind turn to something his mother had said to him.

She had encouraged him to reach out to people he once knew. Old friends. Most of them still lived in town and would be more than happy to see him.

But Edgar resisted. He didn't feel ready to see his old friends yet. If he was being honest with himself, he didn't know that he would ever feel ready.

Living through the war, his imprisonment, and having been forced to do the things he'd had to do to survive, he no longer felt as if he could just pick up where he'd left off.

Edgar felt different. Changed. And when he thought of his old life, it felt like a jacket that was several sizes too small for him.

It just didn't fit anymore. It was uncomfortable.

His mother had been insistent that he reach out to Maude. She'd thought that if anybody could help him through this rough patch, it would be her.

His mother recognized that Maude had always been a touchstone in his life. Somebody who knew his mind even better than he did, and had always been a salve for his heart and soul.

She knew of the feelings between them and told Edgar she thought embracing those feelings with Maude once more could be the key to unlocking the light she believed still burned within him.

But as Edgar thought of Maude, of the life they'd shared together and the feelings they'd both had but never expressed, he felt a stitch in his heart.

Edgar missed Maude. He couldn't deny that. But he was afraid of reaching out to her, afraid of finding out that, like everybody else in his life, she no longer fit.

He didn't know he could bear that. His memories of Maude were the only happy memories he had. They were the only comfort and solace in his life.

And while he desperately wanted her back in his life, wanted to once again feel that warmth and that sense of completeness, he worried that, like everything else, it would never be the same again.

More than that, it had been so long since they'd last spoken or exchanged letters, he was certain she'd had to have moved forward in her life.

He knew his mother had written to Maude and told her that he had been taken prisoner. For all Maude knew, Edgar was dead. He couldn't have blamed her in the least for moving forward with her life.

There was part of him that wanted to believe otherwise, but he knew it was entirely possible, if not likely, that Maude had met somebody. That perhaps she was even married and had started a family of her own.

God knew there were plenty of smart, wealthy men in Boston who could have provided her the sort of life Edgar thought she deserved. And she was certainly beautiful enough to attract the attention of any of them.

No, it seemed of little use to think about a life with Maude, let alone to reach out to her to see about rekindling the feelings they once shared.

Time moved on and nothing ever stayed the same. Edgar had enough to cope with without adding a broken heart to the mix.

He slipped the sheet of paper out of his pocket and carefully unfolded it. After so many years, the paper was tattered and stained. Smears of dried blood marred the surface, and it felt like it was on the verge of dissolving into nothing.

But, somehow, it had stayed intact—held together, he assumed, with hope and love.

It had been the only thing that had kept him from falling into a deep and unrelenting despair in that cellar for all those years. It was the only light in the otherwise ceaseless misery that had been his life as a prisoner of war.

It was that scrap of paper that had kept Edgar tethered to the world and would not let him give into his despondency.

There, on the banks of the river he'd walked so often with Maude

in what felt like an entirely different lifetime, he read the words he'd committed to memory so long ago. Words that he could recite even without the paper in his hands.

But something about having it, about holding it in his hands, felt like he still shared that bond with Maude. It was as true that day on the river as it had been every day, week, and month of his captivity.

12

Mrs. Stewart came into the kitchen where Maude was kneading a mound of dough, readying it for baking. She stood next to Maude, favoring her with a warm smile.

“What is it?” Maude asked.

Mrs. Stewart pulled a letter from the pocket of her apron and held it up for Maude to see. Looking at the envelope, Maude felt her spirits immediately lighten, her smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Is that what I think it is, and from who I think it’s from?” she asked.

“And who else would it be from? Got a stable of suitors writing to you that I don’t know about?” Mrs. Steward teased.

“Stop. You know I don’t,” Maude laughed softly.

“Well, then, I guess it is what you think it is, and from who you think it’s from.”

She handed the letter over and Maude slipped it into her apron, giving Mrs. Stewart a grateful smile.

Maude had been shocked, though overjoyed, when she had received Edgar's first letter. As the weeks had dragged on once the surrender of the Confederacy was made official, and she had not heard from him, Maude had started to lose hope.

She assumed that her worst fears were true, and that Edgar had died in whatever camp he was being held in as a prisoner of war.

It had broken her heart to let go of Edgar. Thinking that the bright, vibrant light inside of him had been snuffed out had left her devastated.

She had been a shell of herself for a long while, just drifting through time, no longer caring about her situation or how her aunt Tilda screamed at and abused her.

Life had lost its color and flavor for Maude. Everything around her was simply drab shades of gray and she'd shuffled through the world like a ghost.

But then that first letter had arrived and everything changed. The world had come back into focus and its sharp colors and details had returned.

Maude felt like she'd been resurrected from the grave and given a second chance to live the life she had desired for so long. A life by Edgar's side.

It was clear to Maude straight away, though, that Edgar was a changed man. When he wrote, his words were without much of a sense of hope or optimism.

Not that Edgar was ever an overly optimistic man, but back in Mayfield, he had often spoken of the future in an excited way that

told Maude he was eager for it. That he was looking forward to what life held in store for him.

His letters now contained none of that. Reading his words made her feel as if he was existing in that world of gray, undefined nothingness she'd walked through when she thought him dead.

There was no vibrancy in his words. There was barely any life in them.

She could tell he was trying, but she knew him so well that she could hear how stiff and wooden his voice was behind the writing.

Even still, letters from Edgar managed to brighten her spirits. They lifted up her heart in ways she feared she'd never feel again. It made her once again feel a hope she hadn't had in what seemed like a lifetime.

She was worried about him, though, worried at the bleakness and near despair she recognized in his words. It made her sad to know that whatever he'd endured as a POW continued to bring him such pain.

Maude was concerned that Edgar would never again be the man he once was. The man who was so full of life and joy.

Maude didn't know if, after the trauma and suffering he endured, he would ever be able to find his way back to being that man again.

And, selfishly, it made her worry that the embers of hope she'd been nurturing since receiving that first letter would gutter and die out.

“So, has he asked you to come back to Mayfield yet?” Mrs. Stewart asked. “To be his bride?”

Maude’s cheeks flushed and she looked away, a tendril of sadness wrapping itself around her heart and squeezing it tightly.

“No, he hasn’t,” Maude replied. “I’m not sure he is planning to, either.”

“Why would you say something like that, dear?”

Maude frowned. “He’s changed, Mrs. Stewart. He’s not the boy I knew.”

The older woman nodded as if she understood. “I hear that war changes a man. Especially after enduring what that poor young man went through.

“I can’t see how he could ever be the same person again.”

Maude looked down at the dough on the board, emotions thick and suffocating rising up within her. She fought to keep the tears from falling, and only when she had control of herself again did she look up.

Mrs. Stewart looked back at her with an expression of sympathy on her face. The older woman put her hand on Maude’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“But that doesn’t mean he can’t still be somebody you love, Maude. It doesn’t mean he’s a man no longer worthy of your heart and affection,” she said.

“But what if he no longer wants those things? Certainly, there

hasn't been much in the way of warmth or affection in his letters to me."

"Men often have a hard time expressing their emotions. They're just naturally more hesitant to open up that part of themselves."

A soft smile touched Maude's lips. "Edgar was not hesitant to open up. Not to me.

"He had a hard time expressing his emotions not because he was reluctant to do so, but because he lacked the words."

"He's a rare man, indeed, then. All the more reason to not give up on him just yet," Mrs. Stewart said.

"It's only been a few months since he returned home. It may take some time for him to heal after his horrifying experience."

Maude nodded. "Yes. You're right. I can't imagine what it must have been like to endure what he did.

"It probably will take some time for him to be able to put it behind him. Thank you for your sage words, Mrs. Stewart."

The older woman looked at her with a sparkle in her eye and a gentle smile curling her lips upward.

"And it could be that you are just the balm Edgar needs. The light that will help guide his way through the darkness," she said.

"I certainly hope so," Maude replied.

She desperately wanted to believe Mrs. Stewart. Wanted to believe that Edgar simply needed time to heal, and that she could soothe

his wounds.

Maude wanted to believe that she could heal him, that she could help restore him to the man he was. The man she'd given her heart to.

But deep down, she worried that she couldn't, that her light wasn't strong enough to lead him out of the darkness. While Maude wanted to believe otherwise, she doubted herself.

The years in her aunt's employ had dulled some of her confidence. It made her question her ability to cut through the layers of trauma and pain that seemed to be so tightly woven around Edgar.

"Trust in yourself, Maude," Mrs. Stewart advised. "You'll know what to do when the time comes."

Maude offered the older woman a weak, watery smile. "I pray that you're right. I pray hard for that."

Later that night, after her chores had been finished and she'd taken a meal in the kitchen with the rest of the staff, Maude retired to her room.

She quickly stripped down to her shift and cleaned herself up, then stoked the fire in the small hearth to warm her chamber.

A couple of years back, her aunt Tilda had finally relented and allowed her to occupy a room with a hearth. But she'd had to work hard for it.

That done, Maude snuggled beneath her thick comforter and atop

the down mattress she had purchased with her own money, earned from the tutoring job she still had.

Maude had grown tired of the hard, lumpy mattress and thin blanket she'd had to use for so long, and had finally decided that if she was going to stay here—and her lack of options dictated that she would—she was at least going to be comfortable.

With the oil lantern on the bedside table glowing, filling the room with its soft orange light, Maude finally took hold of the envelope Mrs. Stewart had given her and opened it.

A faint smile appeared on her lips as she looked at the familiar handwriting, but the smile soon faded as she thought about everything she'd spoken with Mrs. Stewart about earlier.

Pushing all of the dark, gloomy thoughts from her mind, Maude focused on the letter in her hands and began to read.

Dearest Maude,

I hope my letter finds you well. Although it's been some time now, it still feels strange waking up in my own bed.

Strange going through my day and seeing familiar faces like my ma and pa, rather than the faces of men I barely knew. Captives like myself. Forced to live together.

Men I endured every hardship with. Men I tended to while they were sick, who tended to me when I was, and men I had to watch die.

For so long, I was waiting for my turn to die. I knew it was coming, it was only a matter of when. Not if.

The cruelty of Captain Landon was intolerable. It was inhuman. But, somehow, we endured our hardship. I can only think it's by the grace of God that we survived at all.

But now that I'm home, free of all that, I can't stop thinking about it. When I close my eyes at night, I see Captain Landon's face.

I can hear the screams of the men being tortured ringing in my ears. As hard as I try, I can't make it stop.

The only thing that brings me some sense of solace and comfort are thoughts about you, Maude.

I think of you often. Not just because it drowns out the voices, but because I miss you.

I was walking down by the Double B yesterday and remembering the day I gave you that necklace. I often wonder if you still have it.

Almost involuntarily, Maude's hand reached up and touched the necklace. She slid the pad of her finger across the smooth opal embedded in the pendant and smiled.

Of course she still had it. She was never without it. Maude turned back to the letter.

It was only thoughts of you that helped me endure in that place, Maude. It was your letter that helped get me through.

It was my light in the darkness, and the thought of seeing you again is what gave me the strength and courage to endure. I just thought you should know that.

I don't know what the future holds in store for me anymore. I don't

know what's going to become of me.

I am sorry if my tone is so morose as I write this. I don't seem to be in control of my emotions anymore; they just seem to come and go as it pleases them.

But please know, when I think of you there is nothing but warmth and affection. It was thoughts of you, and your letter, that gave me hope and comfort during my ordeal.

And I want to thank you for that. I want to thank you for being my solace. For always giving me that sense of… home.

Fondest regards,

Edgar

Maude pressed her head back into the pillows and laid the letter on her chest. Staring up at the ceiling, she ruminated on Edgar's words.

She could feel the pain and the torment he must be feeling and wondered how he was able to endure it. And she worried about what he might do to put an end to it.

She did not think Edgar was the type of man who would take his own life, but she had heard stories about men who'd come back from the war doing just that.

She was glad she could be his sense of comfort and solace. But Maude felt she could do more, should do more.

She wasn't sure what just yet, given the distance between them, but she resolved that she would figure out a way to help Edgar.

She would be that shining light that led him out of the darkness.

13

The morning sun shone down upon Edgar, warming his skin.

He leaned back and turned his face up to the sky, letting the rays rain down upon his face.

The birds chirped loudly as they flitted from tree to tree, and the air was redolent with the smell of apples.

It was a scent that pleased him. It was one of the few things he held onto in a world that brought him increasingly less joy.

“I thought I’d find you out here.”

Edgar turned his head to see his mother approaching him. He shifted in his seat and gave her a warm smile.

Anna sat down in the chair next to his and handed him the mug of coffee she’d brought out for him. He nodded his thanks and took a sip, and they sat side by side in silence for several long minutes.

She finally turned to him, worry creasing her brow, and Edgar knew what was coming next.

“Your father’s going into town in a little while,” she said. “I

thought it might be nice if you went with him."

"I'd rather not."

"Why not, Edgar? You never leave the house. In fact, you spend more time just sitting out here in the orchard than you do inside," she pressed.

Edgar took a drink of his coffee and looked off into the distance. He watched the birds dart from one tree to another, some of them scooping insects out of the air as they went.

The orchard around him was active and so full of life, with the birds, the squirrels, and other critters wandering through. Perhaps that was why he enjoyed it out there so much—that vibrancy and life was the exact opposite of how he felt inside.

"I just don't want to, Ma," he said.

"This isn't healthy, this never leaving home and sitting in the orchard all day," she said. "This isn't good for you. You're too… alone."

"That's the way I want to be right now. Alone," he insisted, a little heat creeping into his voice. "I don't want to be around people, Ma. Can't you understand that?"

"No, frankly, I don't understand it, Edgar. Too much isolation like this isn't natural. You used to be so friendly and outgoing. And now you're just like a ghost wandering through life."

"Things change, Ma. People change. And when you go through war, and go through what I did after I was captured, it'll change you a lot."

Edgar cringed at the anger and brittleness in his voice. He hated using his experience in the war as an excuse for his temperament.

But there was no getting around the fact that he had been changed because of what had happened to him. Because of the things he'd had to do.

A person couldn't endure what he had without it leaving some scars, both inside and out.

He knew he wasn't angry with his mother and felt bad for lashing out at her. But he wasn't in control of his emotions lately. Hadn't been since he'd returned home, and he didn't know how to get a handle on his feelings and rein them in.

It was part of the reason he had avoided people since coming home. Not being able to control himself or his emotions could lead to a bad situation.

A potentially violent one, at that. And Edgar thought he'd seen enough violence for one lifetime. Probably two or three.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I'm not cross with you."

"I know you're not."

She reached out and laid a gentle hand on his arm, giving it a light squeeze. "I just worry about you," she said quietly.

"I know, Ma. But I'm fine. No need for you to worry. Besides, I'm sure there are far more important things for you to be worried about than me."

"You're my son and I love you, Edgar. There is nothing more

important for me to worry about than you."

Edgar drank his coffee as they sat in a companionable silence for a while. A cool breeze blew through the orchard, stirring the trees and making the leaves rustle overhead.

His mother slipped an envelope out of her coat and handed it to him. Edgar looked at it and frowned.

"Your father brought this home from the postmaster yesterday. I wanted to give it to you then, but you'd already gone to sleep," she said.

Edgar nodded and turned the envelope over in his hand, feeling the sharp pang of disappointment that it wasn't a letter from Maude.

Her letters had been the only thing that kept him going anymore, it seemed; the one thing in his life that he looked forward to. Maybe it wasn't healthy, but Edgar knew that was just where he was at.

"Department of the Interior," he said, though he knew his mother had already seen who it was from.

His mother cocked her head at him. "What could they possibly be writing to you about?"

Edgar had an idea, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he opened the envelope and pulled out the piece of paper, reading it over a couple of times to confirm his thoughts before handing it over to his mother.

He waited as she read it, and only when she looked up did he tell her what it meant.

“My service with the Union entitles me to one hundred and sixty acres of land out west,” he said. “That’s the deed for the land.”

Anna’s eyes widened. “A hundred and sixty acres. That’s a pretty large spread, Edgar. You could do a lot with that.”

He nodded, but looked off into the distance again and remained quiet. He could feel his mother staring at him and knew what questions must be going through her mind.

Why wouldn’t he want to take advantage of this land grant? It truly could change his life.

It was what he’d gone to war for, what he’d fought and bled for. What he’d endured countless months of torture and deprivation for.

This was his reward for his service.

And as Edgar sat there, staring at nothing in particular, he didn’t care. What had mattered to him just a few short years ago, the things he’d worked and sweated for, and the things he’d planned for his life… he just didn’t care about it.

Any of it. It was no longer important to him.

“Edgar, this could be a really good thing for you,” his mother said cautiously.

“Getting out of Mayfield and starting your own life? Building your life the way you want? This land grant honestly couldn’t have come at a better time.”

Edgar shrugged and remained silent, finishing the last of his coffee

as he watched a bird hopping along the branch of a tree before taking wing. He tracked the bird as it flew off until it finally disappeared from view.

“Edgar? Don’t you have anything to say?”

“What would you like me to say, Mother?”

“I’d like you to say that you’re going to take this land grant and do something with it,” she replied. “That you’re going to use it to build the life you’ve talked about for years.

“Your own ranch, Edgar. Can you imagine that?”

Once upon a time, he could have imagined it. In fact, he had imagined it very well, in great detail.

But that time had come and gone, and he was no longer the same man he was back then, and his imagination had dissipated.

For so long, all he had been able to focus on was survival, his world confined to that cellar. He couldn’t think or see anything the same way anymore. He didn’t know how.

“Edgar, I think taking this opportunity and building your own homestead, creating your world with your own two hands… I think it could work wonders for you.

“I think it could go a long way toward healing yourself,” his mother said gently.

A bitter smirk crossed Edgar’s lips. The idea of healing and moving forward from what he’d suffered seemed to be a cruel joke. He didn’t actually believe he would ever be able to heal, let alone

move forward in his life.

His dreams, as well as his waking thoughts, were largely consumed by memories of what he'd endured at the hands of Captain Landon —and that wasn't something you could just forget. Not even in a new place.

"Edgar—"

"Please leave me alone, Ma," he said softly. "I don't want to lash out at you again. I just… I want to be alone."

Anna hesitated and, with a frown on her face, got to her feet. She started to turn away, but stopped. When she turned back to him, her expression was one of deep concern.

"I'll go, Edgar. But please tell me that you'll think about this. Please tell me that you will seriously consider taking advantage of this land grant," she pleaded with him.

"I'll… think about it."

"One more thing. I'd like you to also consider writing to Maude and asking for her hand in marriage."

He stared at her blankly for a moment as he let her words sink into his mind and rattle around in his head. His stomach churned and his mouth grew dry.

"Ask for her hand?" was all he could think to say.

"I see the way your face lights up when a letter from her arrives, Edgar. It seems to be the only thing that makes you smile anymore," she said.

“I know you two love each other, have since you were kids. And if there’s one person who can help you heal, well, I think it might be Maude.”

Without another word, his mother turned and walked back toward the house, leaving Edgar alone with his thoughts. Her words echoed through his mind.

It was true. He loved Maude, and he always had. There was a time when he’d thought it was inevitable that they would be together.

But that was a long time ago and he didn’t feel as if he knew her anymore. He knew she was unhappy in Boston and that her aunt was a monster.

But he didn’t know if she felt the same way about him anymore, or whether she had a beau of her own. She hadn’t said anything, and Edgar was not a man who took anything for granted.

He recognized that his mother had a point, though.

Maude was the only spot of color in his increasingly drab, gray world, the only thing that brought him even the smallest note of happiness.

If anybody could help pull him out of the darkness he seemed to exist in, she might be the one. But he wasn’t sure even she could help him.

Edgar thought he might be well beyond hope or redemption.

14

The page trembled in Maude's hands as she read the contents several times.

Even though the words Edgar had written hadn't changed since last night, when she'd read his letter in bed, and she wasn't misreading anything, Maude sat back in stunned disbelief.

Her heart spun wildly within her and she shuddered with a blend of fear and excitement.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Glancing up, Maude found Mrs. Stewart looking down at her. She gave the older woman a smile she hoped looked more convincing than it felt.

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking," she said.

Mrs. Stewart pulled the chair out and sat down across the table from her, eyeing her closely. They sat in a small walled courtyard on the side of her aunt's house that was filled with flowering bushes and tall, thin trees.

Maude enjoyed it immensely and often relaxed here with a cup of tea when she took a break from her duties.

“You look upset, dear.”

Maude shook her head. “I’m not upset. I’m just… to be honest, I don’t know what I am,” she admitted with a weak laugh.

“Well, why don’t you tell me what’s going on? Talking things out often provides some sense of clarity.”

Maude’s eyes drifted down to the letter in her hand and she again felt that odd mix of emotions swirling around inside of her. But she thought Mrs. Stewart was right.

Talking it out might provide her with some semblance of clarity. Or, at least, might make things slightly less opaque.

Maude valued the older woman’s wisdom and advice, and she felt like she needed both of those things more than ever.

“Edgar wants me to marry him,” she announced.

Maude slid the letter across the table to Mrs. Stewart and watched as the older woman picked up the page and read through it.

When she was finished, she set it back down on the table and looked at Maude, favoring her with a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

“You’re going to say yes, aren’t you?” she asked.

Maude shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure what to make of it.”

“How can you not be sure what to make of it?” Mrs. Stewart replied with a gentle laugh. “He asked for your hand. It seems pretty straightforward to me.”

“But he is also very troubled, Mrs. Stewart. Is he asking for my hand because he genuinely wants me to be his wife? Or is it because he just needs somebody to take care of him?”

“Ask yourself this, dear… is he the type of man who’d trick you into marrying him just because he needs you to take care of him?”

A wry grin twisted her lips. “No. Probably not. Edgar is a proud man. Stubborn and proud, which can be infuriating sometimes.”

Mrs. Stewart laughed softly. “Of that, I have no doubt.

“But I think that makes my point for me. He wouldn’t ask you for your help, which tells me he’d never try to trick you into helping him.

“Either way, you’d be seeing him at his worst and weakest. And based on everything you’ve told me about Edgar, he’s as likely to do that as he is to cut his own hand off.”

Maude pursed her lips and looked down at the paper sitting between them on top of the table as she weighed the older woman’s words.

Mrs. Stewart made a face, then grinned as Maude came to the inescapable conclusion that she was right. A small smile crossed her face.

“You’re probably not wrong about that,” Maude said.

“Then, to my mind, that really only leaves one option… he wants to marry you because he loves you.”

Though Mrs. Stewart’s words made her feel somewhat better, Maude wasn’t entirely reassured. Edgar’s proposal had come out of nowhere and it seemed… forced.

His words weren’t about love and devotion. The letter read more like a resignation to the inevitable. While it was true that once upon a time, their being together had seemed like an inevitability, time moved on and they had both changed.

Added to that was Edgar’s seeming descent into a bleak, depressive state. Maude was left wondering whether he still had genuine feelings for her that would lead him to wanting to spend the rest of his life with her.

“Do you love him, Maude?”

Mrs. Stewart’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts and back to reality. She looked at the older woman thoughtfully as she pondered the question, finding that it wasn’t such an easy question to answer.

“Certainly there will always be a part of me that loves him,” she said. “But it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.

“We’re not the same people anymore. We’ve both grown and changed. Edgar probably more so, given his experience in the war.”

“We grow and change whether we’re together twenty-four hours a day or whether we go twenty-four years between visits. You are certainly not the same girl who showed up on this doorstep several

years ago, Maude," Mrs. Stewart said.

"But that goes right to my point, Mrs. Stewart. What if the ways in which I've changed are no longer compatible with the man Edgar is today?"

The older woman favored her with a gentle smile. "Because although we may change a great deal, the core of who we are remains intact.

"You're not the same girl you were when you first arrived. Certainly, you're different in so many ways.

"But those pieces of you that make up who you really are, your heart and the core of you, those things have not changed.

"Deep inside, you're the same person you were when you arrived, Maude. You're sweet and fierce, intelligent, and devoted.

"All of those wonderful qualities about you haven't changed a bit. And I suspect that despite everything he's endured, the same can be said about Edgar and all of those things about him you fell in love with."

Maude wrung her hands together, her mind spinning wildly out of control and her heart thundering in her chest.

There was still part of her—that idealistic girl who'd loved walking along the banks of the river with Edgar, the girl who'd given him her heart—that loved him. That wanted to spend the rest of her days with him.

But there was another part of her that was scared, not knowing what he would actually be like if she said yes.

Maude was terrified his wounds from the war ran too deep, and he would be a man she no longer recognized. And that she would not be that shining light that led him out of whatever dark place he was stuck in.

“Maude, it’s a way out for you,” Mrs. Stewart pressed. “You can get out from under your aunt’s thumb. I know how miserable you are here, dear.

“Oh, you put on a good face and your false smile is the best I’ve seen. But it is false, and I’ve seen you alone in the back room weeping to yourself when you thought nobody was watching.”

Maude felt her cheeks flush. It was true that there had been a great many times she’d hidden in the back room, sobbing to herself, after getting a vicious tongue lashing from her aunt Tilda.

She thought she’d been quiet and unobserved, and it shamed and embarrassed her to know that she had, in fact, been seen. She wondered if Tilda had ever seen her acting out like that before.

“This is your chance, Maude. Seize your opportunity to make a better life for yourself,” Mrs. Stewart implored her. “You don’t want to end up like me.

“You don’t want to be stuck in a thankless job for the rest of your life because you have no other options. A grand opportunity is presenting itself to you, girl.

“Take it. Grab hold of it with both hands and don’t let go.”

“But what if he’s too deep in that dark place in his mind? What if I can’t reach him?” Maude asked, her voice trembling.

Mrs. Stewart took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, her eyes pinning Maude to her seat.

“Love will always find a way. I won’t say it’s going to be easy or there won’t be some rough patches that have you doubting yourself.

“But if you love each other and have the strength to persevere, there is no hill too steep for the both of you to climb. So long as you do it together.”

Maude fell silent and lowered her gaze as she tried to find some order to her thoughts, to harness the feelings running roughshod through her.

Everything Mrs. Stewart said heartened her. Firmed her resolve. But it couldn’t quite quash all of her doubts and fears entirely.

“Sometimes, you have to take a leap of faith, Maude. If you love him and being with him is worth it, you just need to close your eyes and jump,” she said.

Maude bit her bottom lip. In her mind’s eye, she saw flashes of her younger days, times she spent with Edgar. She heard the echo of his voice and his laughter, and recalled the feeling of his toned, firm body pressed to hers.

She shared so many good memories with him, and Maude wanted to believe they could have those again. She wanted to believe they could be happy together.

But she would have been lying to herself if she didn’t admit there was a current of fear flowing through her veins alongside the hope for a better future. And if there was one thing Maude had learned

over the years, it was to never lie to herself.

“Do you have the money for a train ticket?” Mrs. Stewart asked, and Maude nodded.

She had managed to squirrel away enough over the years that she could purchase a train ticket back to Mayfield. She’d guarded her money jealously, hiding it well, lest her aunt take her take her nest egg for “room and board” again.

“I do,” she said.

“Then that settles it,” Mrs. Stewart declared, a wide smile on her face. “You need to get on that train. Do you hear me, Maude? Get on the train.”

“Get on the train to where?”

The two women’s heads snapped around immediately, and the color drained from Maude’s face when she saw her aunt standing in the courtyard, her eyes narrowed, her expression dark.

Mrs. Stewart jumped to her feet and Maude followed suit. They exchanged a quick look and Maude felt her mouth grow dry.

“I asked you a question,” Tilda repeated. “Take a train where?”

Maude remained silent and shifted on her feet. Tilda looked from her to Mrs. Stewart and back again, her expression darkening even more.

Tilda was used to being obeyed immediately and did not take well to her staff not doing as she commanded. Maude had accepted long ago that she was nothing more than staff to her aunt. Albeit staff

she didn't have to pay.

"Are you planning on going somewhere, Maude?" Tilda demanded.

Maude swallowed hard, trying to work up some moisture in her mouth. Clasping her hands in front of her, she raised her eyes to her aunt.

"Back to Mayfield, Aunt Matilda."

Her aunt stared at her for a long moment, anger crackling in the air around her. Tilda looked over to Mrs. Stewart, a sneer upon her lips.

"And you knew about this?" she hissed. "How long have you two been cooking up this little scheme?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Mrs. Stewart said quietly. "It was not my place to say."

"Mrs. Steward knew nothing, Aunt Tilda. This was my doing," Maude said.

"You are excused, Mrs. Stewart. I will deal with you later," Tilda growled.

Mrs. Stewart gave her a small curtsy and rushed away, disappearing inside the house and leaving Maude alone with her aunt, who looked apoplectic.

But she managed to bite down her anger, taking a moment to gather herself. And when she turned back to Maude, she actually had a smile on her face.

“Now, what is this about going back to Mayfield?” she asked.

Maude bit her bottom lip, trying to figure out what to say. She had no desire to tell Tilda she was considering going back for Edgar.

She already knew well what her aunt would say to that; Tilda did not have a favorable outlook on love, marriage, or men as a whole. Besides that, Maude didn’t think it was any of Tilda’s business.

“Why in heaven’s name would you even consider going back to such a backwater?” Tilda pressed. “You’re part of a cultured society here in Boston.”

“I’m not part of anything here, Aunt Matilda. Except for your household staff,” Maude snapped.

“That’s not true, Maude. I’ve taken you in. I’ve given you a home. I’ve—”

“You’ve basically forced me to work as your slave.”

Tilda looked at her as if Maude had just slapped her across the face. For the first time since Maude arrived in Boston, she felt her control over her emotions slipping.

The anger that had been at a constant boil below the surface was beginning to bubble up and over. She stood up straighter with her back stiffer, her own expression darkening for the first time as she looked at her aunt.

The false smile she usually wore fell away and she was left with a scowl on her face.

“You lured me here with promises of love and family. You used my

grief as a weapon, Aunt Tilda," she spat.

"You knew exactly what to say. Exactly what I wanted to hear. And you played on my emotions to get me here, all so I could be another one of your servants."

Tilda looked shocked. "Maude, how dare you."

"No, Tilda. How dare you!" Maude sneered. "How dare you use my grief to do this to me? You never cared about me. You used me."

Tilda put her hands on her hips, her scowl deep and her expression furious as she glared at Maude.

"So that's it. You're just going to abandon your family like this?" Tilda cried. "You're just going to turn your back on me after everything I've done for you."

"What exactly have you done for me, Tilda?"

"That is Aunt Matilda to you, little girl."

"No, it's not. Calling you Aunt Tilda implies that you're my family. And it's taken me a long time to see that you're anything but.

"You're an abusive and cruel old spinster. And I will no longer tolerate your mistreatment of me," she huffed.

Tilda glared at her for several long moments, neither of them speaking. The tension and anger in the air was thick. Stifling.

But Maude didn't back down. She stared back at Tilda, her expression every bit as dark and fierce.

“This is absurd, Maude. Go back to your room and we will discuss this later. You’re not going back to that backwater of a town I rescued you from.”

“I’m not going back to my room. And I’m done letting you tell me what to do,” Maude spat.

“You will go back to your room and you will obey me. You will not turn your back on this family. I forbid it.”

“You’re not my mother. And I no longer consider you family,” Maude shot back. “I’m going back to Mayfield and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

Without waiting for Tilda to say anything more, Maude brushed past her and headed for her room to start packing. She was going to be on the next train to Mayfield.

She would marry Edgar and they would find a way to make it work. To make themselves happy.

As she pounded up the stairs, she made that silent vow to herself in earnest.

15

“Hello. How do you do?”

Edgar shook his head and continued to pace the platform at the train station, practicing his greetings.

His mouth was dry, his palms were damp, and he felt tremors racing through his entire body. He’d never felt more nervous in his life.

“It’s great to see you again, Maude. How do you do?”

He growled to himself and shook his head again, ignoring the questioning looks from the other people on the platform.

He knew he probably looked like a fool, or somebody who’d gone mad, but he didn’t care. People in town already thought him mad, anyway.

Maude was coming in on the train that was due in any minute and Edgar still hadn’t figured out how to properly greet her. Should he embrace her? Shake her hand? Should he simply nod and say something?

He didn't know and it made him feel like a fool. She was his oldest friend and it frustrated him that he didn't know how to greet her after so long.

This should be the simplest thing in the world. And yet, it suddenly felt like the most complicated thing he'd ever done.

Standing before Maude and looking her in the eye after so long suddenly seemed more daunting than staring down the bayonet charge of a division of graycoats.

His stomach seemed to be turning over on itself inside of him, making Edgar feel as if he might be sick.

He took a deep breath, telling himself there was nothing to be concerned about since they'd known each other since they were kids.

But Edgar knew the truth of the matter was that the woman who was going to be stepping off that train was a complete stranger to him.

Sure, they'd been exchanging letters for months now, but he could tell just by her words that she was not the same girl who'd left Mayfield all those years ago.

She'd changed. As he had.

And Edgar knew their shared history, all of the good times they'd had together and the feelings that once ran so deeply between them, was irrelevant. That was another life and it had no bearing on the present.

The two people who had loved each other so well all those years

ago were gone, and in their place were two new people who had to get to know each other all over again.

Edgar truly hoped that they would be compatible together.

The train whistle sounded and Edgar turned to see it round a bend a little ways off as it made the final push to the station. His heart jumped into his throat as he watched the train coming, the roar of its engine deafening.

With a loud squeal of metal, the driver applied the brakes. The train slowed and eventually came to a stop at the platform.

Some small part of him wanted to turn and run before Maude got down off the train. His fear was overwhelming.

His heart was thundering in his chest, his mouth was dry, the feeling of nausea grew ever stronger, and he tasted his bile in the back of his throat.

Edgar fought the fear gripping him, forcing himself to remain where he was. It was a Herculean effort, but he somehow managed it.

As the people began disembarking from the train, Edgar watched happy couples greeting each other with a kiss, and friends with handshake. He steeled himself.

It was too late. There was no turning back now.

Edgar stiffened his back and licked his lips, watching the tide of folks getting off the train. It still sometimes amazed him that so many people were living in and coming to Mayfield.

It was also a reason he did not come into town unless he absolutely had to. Being around so many people bothered him, made him feel claustrophobic and uncomfortable.

“Edgar.”

Her voice snapped him out of his thoughts and brought him back to the present. He turned around and found Maude standing there stiffly, wringing her hands.

She chewed on her lower lip and Edgar could see she was as nervous as he was. It made him wonder, for the millionth time, if they were doing the right thing.

“It’s really good to see you again. I’ve… missed you,” she said.

“I—I’ve missed you, too, Maude. It’s been a long while.”

She nodded her head. “It has been.”

“How was your trip?”

Her grin was rueful. “Much better than the trip to Boston. No stagecoaches and bumpy roads this time.”

Edgar chuckled. “Welcome to the modern world.”

“I still can’t believe Mayfield has a train station now.”

He nodded and looked around. “The town you left behind has grown up,” he said. “I could hardly believe it when I came home myself.”

She gave him a gentle smile but said nothing. It was almost as if

she was afraid to bring up the circumstances of his return.

“Anyway… welcome home.”

Maude’s smile grew warmer and more genuine, making Edgar’s heart beat harder than it ever had before.

Feeling slightly more at ease simply by being in her presence, he stepped forward and extended his arms, pulling her into an embrace that was stiff and awkward. Maude leaned against him, returning his embrace, but she too was rigid.

After a long moment, they stepped back from each other, nervous laughter escaping their mouths. Edgar looked away, unable to meet her eyes, feeling as if he was choking on his nervousness.

He finally managed to force his gaze back to her. “The years have been good to you, Maude. Y—you look amazin’. Like you haven’t aged a day,” he said, and meant it.

The way the sun rained down on her, Maude seemed to glow with an inner light. A soft nimbus surrounded her, making her look positively ethereal.

Her dark hair contrasted nicely with her creamy white skin, and her dark eyes seemed bottomless and soulful in ways only time and experience could have gifted her.

In many ways, she was still that lovely girl he’d given his heart to so long ago. But age had refined and matured her looks, and she was a stunningly beautiful woman.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “You look good as well.”

He scoffed. “Nice of you to say, but I know I look pretty torn up.”

Edgar knew he had aged far less gracefully than Maude. His time in the military, specifically his time in captivity, had aged him. It had deepened the lines in his face, giving him a far more grizzled and rough appearance.

Edgar felt he looked fifty years older than the last time he’d seen Maude, and he was a little self-conscious about it. Especially in light of her near-ageless appearance.

“You don’t look torn up, Edgar,” she replied, a warm smile up on her lips. “You’ve grown into a very handsome man.”

Maude looked away, her cheeks flushing with color, as if she couldn’t believe her own boldness.

Her words made Edgar feel a bit better and she sounded sincere, but the darker side of his mind whispered to him, told him she was simply being kind. She didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

He gave her a smile. “Did you ever think you’d be back here in Mayfield?”

Maude returned his smile. “I honestly didn’t. When I left Mayfield, I thought it was for good.”

“I’m sorry that Boston and your aunt didn’t live up to what you’d hoped they’d be,” Edgar told her sincerely.

She shrugged. “Such is life. Not everything lives up to our expectations.”

Edgar frowned and looked around as he was bumped by the people

milling about on the platform.

The porters seemed to be taking their time unloading the baggage car, so he laid his hand on Maude's arm and steered her over to a bench near the station house and sat down with her.

"Looks like it's gonna take them a while to unload your things, so we might as well get out of the way," he explained.

Maude nodded and gave him a small smile. "That's probably a good idea."

They sat side by side in silence for a long moment, just watching the people going by. Maude seemed to be marveling at the mass of people crowded around the train station.

She looked as if she couldn't believe how much Mayfield had grown in her absence. He could absolutely relate.

"I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you came home," he finally said.

She flashed him a sly smile. "It would be difficult to marry you if I hadn't."

Edgar laughed ruefully. "I suppose it would be at that. Still, I'm glad you wanted to marry me at all."

She looked at him for a long moment, her expression thoughtful. Behind those eyes, he could see her mind working and desperately wanted to know what it was she was thinking.

He had written his proposal to her without the expectation that she would agree to marry him. He'd expected her to say she already had a beau, so he'd been surprised when she'd agreed to be his

bride—happily surprised.

“Edgar, I’ve thought about marrying you since we were kids,” she confessed.

“And I used to figure we’d be married one day, too,” he replied. “But things change. People change.”

“I know. But like a friend told me, those pieces of our heart and soul that make us who we are never change. Circumstances may change, but deep down inside, we remain who we are.”

A fond, somewhat nostalgic smile touched her lips and Edgar couldn’t help but wonder if the friend who’d shared that nugget of wisdom with her was a beau.

He cleared his throat and looked away, feeling foolish for allowing such petty and jealous thoughts to creep into his mind.

Maude’s life in Boston, her life before she agreed to marry him, was her own. He had no right to be upset or jealous about anything.

As if reading his mind, she smiled. “I’ll have to tell you about Mrs. Stewart sometime. She was one of the only truly good things to come out of my experience in Boston.”

He looked down, trying to control his thoughts and emotions once more. He knew he’d be lying to himself if he denied feeling a sense of relief sweeping through him.

Edgar knew he had no claim to her, but the idea that she had been with another man bothered him.

Not because she didn't have a right to conduct her own life and her affairs as she saw fit, but because when they were young, he had long wanted to know her touch.

"I'm sorry the rest of your experiences in Boston were so disagreeable for you," he said.

Her lips compressed into a tight line and to Edgar, it seemed as if she was trying to control her emotions.

"It wasn't all disagreeable. There were many good times. There were many good things about my time there," she said softly.

"There were some good people I was fortunate to know. Mrs. Stewart among them, of course."

He nodded. "I'm glad you have some good memories."

Silence descended upon them once more and Edgar noticed that the porters seemed to be putting the last of the baggage on the platform. They got to their feet and walked over to the piles of bags, and he looked to Maude questioningly.

"Which ones are yours?" he asked.

Maude pointed to several bags and a steamer trunk, and when Edgar reached for the first bag, there was a loud, sharp bang from the train as something popped, the noise reverberating across the platform around them.

Edgar's heart leapt into his throat and his entire body stiffened so tight, it was painful. Edgar was shuddering as he fell to a knee, reaching for a sidearm that wasn't there.

His eyes wild, he looked around, searching for the source of the threat. He was suddenly back on the battlefield, sure there were graycoats descending on them.

Slowly, though, he became aware of the people on the platform looking at him as if he'd lost his mind. They whispered behind their hands, some of them laughing.

He didn't care about them or what they thought, but when he looked up and saw Maude looking at him in much the same way, it felt like a kick to the gut that drove the air from his lungs.

Edgar realized it was the train that had made the noise and that he was on the platform in Mayfield, and not on the battlefield. Not in the cellar.

He had heard something benign—not the pistol crack of Captain Landon as he executed yet another of the prisoners.

His face burning with heat and shame gripping him tightly, Edgar got to his feet and looked to Maude.

He didn't know how to make her understand what he was feeling, what his experience had done to him. He didn't know how to help her share his fear and then dispel it.

"I—I'm sorry," he said softly. "I… was dizzy. Lightheaded. I ain't been sleepin' well lately, and think I'm just tired or somethin'."

Maude gave him a patient and understanding smile. "It's all right. I understand, Edgar. I get dizzy, too."

He ducked his head, pointedly avoiding her eyes as he reached down and grabbed her bags.

Leading her to the wagon, Edgar remained silent, berating himself for his foolish behavior. And not for the first time since he proposed, he wondered how he would ever provide for Maude if he couldn't be in public without panicking.

What kind of a life could he give her?

As they walked to the wagon, Edgar had to admit to himself that he still did not have the answers to those questions and more.

16

The last thing Maude wanted to do was embarrass Edgar. His reaction had been excessive and frightening.

He had looked like a caged animal, ready to fight its way out. It told her that his wounds ran deep.

“Are you all right?” she asked as he put her bags in the back of the buckboard.

He nodded. “I’m fine.”

She watched him silently loading up the rest of the things she’d brought back with her. He struggled with the steamer trunk, but when she moved to help him, he waved her off, telling her that he had it under control.

He grunted and his face was pinched and strained, but he got the trunk into the buckboard. She watched Edgar take a moment to catch his breath.

Eventually, his face, red from the exertion, cooled and he caught his breath. He still didn’t speak, though. In fact, he didn’t even look at her.

It made Maude's heart and stomach clench tight. He just looked so far away. Edgar's eyes were glazed over and he had a strange look on his face.

It was like he wasn't with her, like he was somewhere else entirely.

Maude gave him some time, and he finally seemed to come back to himself, back to the present. He climbed into the buckboard, sitting down beside her.

With a snap of the reins, he set the horses in motion. Edgar steered the horses down a long, wide thoroughfare that left Maude gaping.

When she'd left Mayfield, there had been a few basic shops: her parents' general store, a small restaurant, a saloon—the usual things you saw in small towns. But now, she marveled at how much it had grown.

It was one thing to hear Edgar say it, but it was something else entirely to see it with her own two eyes.

While it maintained a rustic feel and was certainly nowhere near as cosmopolitan as Boston, there was little doubt that Mayfield was making a concerted effort to become more like one of the country's great cities.

There was still a long way to go—she noted they didn't even have paved roads just yet—but she thought with the way they were growing, they could eventually get there.

She looked at the mass of humanity that clogged the streets. There were so many people. The population of Mayfield, once so sparse, was booming and flourishing every bit as much as the town.

More than that, Maude noticed that many were finely dressed in silks and colorful clothing, much like people wore in Boston. It was so different from the drab, homespun wool clothing most had worn when she was a resident before.

The buckboard hit a rut in the road and the wagon bounced hard, rattling Maude's bones and reinforcing the fact that Mayfield was still a frontier town.

But when the Wyoming Territory was finally granted statehood, Mayfield would likely be one of the new state's bigger cities, and, given the stop on the rail line, probably the hub of commerce.

"What do you think?" Edgar asked.

She was surprised that he'd spoken. Maude had already resolved herself to a very quiet ride home. But this was a pleasant surprise.

"I can't believe this is Mayfield," she admitted, her voice carrying a note of awe. "It's so much bigger than it used to be."

"It's the march of modern progress. It leaves nothing untouched and it changes everything," he said.

Maude couldn't help but hear the note of cynicism in his voice. She could tell that he didn't particularly care for the "march of modern progress."

She figured that was because progress and modernity always brought a heavy influx of new people along with it. And though she'd only been in his presence for a short while now, Maude could tell that Edgar did not like being around people.

It wasn't anything he said or did in particular, but a combination

of his words, his actions, and how he looked at people. He kept his distance from them.

Even on the platform, she could see how uncomfortable he was around the other people, and how he'd tried to keep a good bubble of space between himself and them.

Now that they were moving away from the throngs of people who filled the streets of Mayfield, Edgar finally looked as if he was starting to loosen up and relax a bit.

However, she could still see the dark expressions he cast her way as they trundled down the road that led them out of town.

"So… how is my house?" she asked brightly, trying to earn a smile from him.

He flashed her a crooked grin. "Truth is, I haven't spent much time there in a while. I'd assume it'll be pretty dusty and dirty.

"I apologize. I figured that we'd just stay with my folks until we're ready to move."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for," she replied. "We should probably talk about everything that's going to happen, don't you think?"

"Suppose so."

He didn't seem particularly excited by the prospect of their getting married and starting off on this adventure together, and that cast a bit of a pall over her own feelings.

She knew Edgar had changed and that his view of things skewed a

bit darker now, but she'd hoped he would at least be able to find some joy in their pending nuptials.

In his letters, he'd said she was his only comfort and sense of solace—thus far, she didn't feel like it.

As if he could read her thoughts, he turned and gave her a soft smile. And when he did, his face softened.

The hard, brittle edges faded away and he looked like the boy she used to know. The boy she'd given her heart to.

It gave Maude hope that everything would be all right, after all.

"Look," he said.

Maude turned and saw that as they left the crowded city of Mayfield behind them, the road they were on opened up to the countryside.

The sun sparkled dazzlingly on the surface of the lake, making it look like a pool of liquid gold, and it was surrounded by endless fields of green grass dotted with wildflowers in a riot of color.

In the distance, she could see a herd of wild bison roaming the plain, and farther off, the peaks of the snow-capped mountains. Everything was so vivid and vibrant.

It was all so… alive. And it made Maude smile appreciatively.

"I forgot how beautiful it is out here," she murmured.

"Boston's not beautiful?"

She shrugged. “It is. It’s just different,” she said. “And it’s not as naturally beautiful as this. I’m only just now realizing how much I missed it.”

“Yeah, there’s somethin’ special about this place. God’s country,” he said. “You can’t beat these views.”

“Boston has some very nice gardens. The Commons are gorgeous,” Maude said, cringing at how defensive she sounded.

They fell silent again as Edgar let her take in the scenery before her. The buckboard rumbled along the road.

She was so captivated by the natural world stretching out before her, she barely noticed the bouncing and jostling of the wheels rolling through the pits and ruts in the hard-packed earth.

“I claimed my hundred and sixty acres of land,” he said out of nowhere.

Maude turned to him, surprised. “You did?”

He nodded. “I did.”

It surprised her because when he’d last written, he’d said that he was not intending to take the land grant because it felt dirty. It felt like it had been paid for in blood, he’d said, both his and that of the men he’d killed during the war.

He’d said that if he took the land, no matter what he did, he would never be able to forget his time in captivity or what was done to him.

“I thought you said—”

“I changed my mind,” he replied sharply, his expression darkening.

Maude bit back her reply, not wanting to upset him any more than he already appeared to be. She was learning that he had a temper like the weather out there on the plains—sunny and clear one moment, dark and stormy the next.

That was something else they were going to need to work on, simply because she could not live like that, in that state of unpredictability and tension. She would not.

He sighed and looked straight ahead of them, his eyes taking on that faraway, almost disassociated glaze to them again.

Edgar didn’t speak for a long few moments and the strained awkwardness between them started to grow heavier and thicker.

He sighed and when she glanced over at him, he had a sheepish expression on his face. It looked to Maude like he felt bad.

“I claimed the land grant in the Yellowstone Valley,” he said without turning to look at her. “My uncle and some of his friends have already started building our home on the land out there.”

“They have?”

He nodded. “They have. Should have a pretty good start on it already.”

It was a reversal that left her head spinning, and one that was inexplicable to her. She was curious what had led him to change his mind about something he had seemed so firmly opposed to not all that long ago.

“May I ask what changed your mind?” she asked.

A pitiable grin touched his lips and he finally turned to her. “My ma, actually.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Your ma?”

He nodded. “She’s been gettin’ on me about needin’ a fresh start. She says I need a change of scenery and somethin’ new and good in my life.”

“I can’t say she was wrong.”

He shook his head. “Me either. At least, not after a long while of her hasslin’ me about it.”

Maude laughed. “So she wore you down?”

“In a manner of speakin’. Yeah, I suppose,” he said.

“But I have to admit… when she’s right, she’s right. Maybe gettin’ out of Mayfield and startin’ over somewhere will be good for me. For us”

“Yeah, maybe.”

They rode along for another couple of moments as Maude thought about what he’d said. When he spoke, she heard just a hint of hope in his voice.

It was faint, barely a spark. But she’d heard it, and it stirred the vague embers of hope inside of her that moving to the land he’d been granted would help pull Edgar out of the darkness.

Perhaps with a fresh start in a new place, she could help lead him out.

“So, tell me about this place. This Yellowstone Valley,” she said, feeling her good cheer starting to return.

A faint smile on his lips, Edgar started telling her about the place that would be their new home. The more he spoke of it, the more she looked forward to seeing it for the first time.

Maude couldn’t deny that she was excited, but it was tempered by the memory of Edgar’s rapidly shifting moods and the darkness that seemed to be a constant companion of his.

Life as Edgar’s wife would be challenging, she knew. But she also knew it could be very well worth it.

17

"Maude, it is so wonderful to see you again," Edgar's mother said, beaming. "I have missed you around here. And I know Edgar has as well."

His mother embraced Maude tightly, giving her a kiss on the cheek. Maude smiled and hugged her back.

The two women looked genuinely happy to see each other and it made Edgar feel good. They were the two most important women in his life and it was vital that they got along.

Especially since his mother would be accompanying them to their new home and staying with them for a while.

"You have grown into a beautiful woman, Maude," his mother said. "You are simply stunning."

Maude blushed hard, her face turning an unnatural shade of red, and she looked away. She couldn't keep the smile from her face and it warmed Edgar's heart to see.

When Maude turned to him, her face was practically glowing.

“I told you,” he said, chuckling. “The years have been good to you.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to get reacquainted,” his mother said. “I’ll see to getting supper ready.”

“Thanks, Ma,” Edgar said.

“Yes, thank you, Mrs. Kettering,” Maude added.

His mother waved her off. “Please, enough of this Mrs. Kettering business,” she said with a laugh. “You’re going to be my daughter. Family. Just call me Anna.”

Maude nodded. “I’ll do that. Thank you… Anna.”

His mother left them out in the front of the house and went back inside. He and Maude stood together, looking at each other in an awkward silence.

“So, I should probably show you some of the things I’ve packed up for the trip out west,” Edgar told her. “And we’ll want to go by your old house in the morning and see if there’s anything there you want to bring with us.”

“That’s a good idea. There were some things I wasn’t able to take to Boston that I’d really like to have.”

“Well, your house may be dusty, but everything you left is still there.”

They both fell quiet again as that sense of awkward tension

descended over them once more. It was an oppressive feeling and it bothered Edgar that their conversations weren't as easy as they'd been before.

He knew he had to accept that it would take some time for them to get used to one another again.

Still, he would have been lying to himself if he'd said it didn't hurt, if only a little, that they couldn't simply pick up where they'd left off and move forward together.

He knew, in large part, that it was his fault. Edgar was keeping himself at an arm's distance from everybody, including Maude. He hated feeling that way.

She was going to be his wife; he needed to learn to lower his defenses with her.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said, still smiling.

"I can't believe we're going to be married and starting a new life together. Yellowstone Valley sounds like a real paradise to me."

"Me too. Nothing but open skies and land all around," Edgar replied. "Speaking of which, I needed to talk to you about something."

She cocked her head at him, her smile slipping. "All right. What about?"

Edgar led her over to a picnic table that stood beneath the tall oak tree near the barn. She sat down on one side of it, and Edgar took the other.

He stared into her eyes for a long moment, collecting his thoughts before he began.

“So, what did you want to talk about?” Maude asked.

“Well… my mother is going to come to the valley with us. She’s going to stay with us for a little while as we get settled,” he said.

Maude sat back and looked at him, a small frown on her face. “I see.”

“It’s not a permanent thing. It’s just… she wants to make sure we’re getting on all right,” he said. “I mean, if that’s all right with you.”

“Yes, yes. I’m all right with that,” she said. “Your ma is a lovely woman. It will be nice to have her.”

“Are you certain?”

She nods. “Of course.”

Maude’s smile seemed real enough, and her words sounded sincere, but Edgar couldn’t help but think she wasn’t as all right with the arrangement as she was letting on.

She seemed to be walking on eggshells around him. He hated that she felt the need to watch what she said around him, to edit herself to avoid setting him off.

But Edgar was still learning to control his emotions, still learning to temper the anger that surged through him. It was a battle he suspected he would be fighting for the rest of his life.

He just hoped he could learn to rein it in enough that he didn't lash out at her. The last thing Edgar wanted was to hurt her with his temper the way he'd hurt his mother.

"Edgar, Maude," his mother called from the door. "Time for supper."

He gave Maude a small smile. "Hungry?"

"Ravenous."

"Good. Then let's eat," he said.

Later that night, Edgar lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Supper had been a lot of fun. There was a lot of reminiscing about the past and a lot of laughter.

Edgar had laughed more than he had in years. Even his father had warmed to him for the first time since he'd been home, sharing stories about what he and his mother had gotten up to while Edgar was away—and some of it was hilarious.

After supper and then coffee, his folks had retired for the night. The long journey finally caught up with Maude, who was exhausted and went off to the guest room to get some sleep.

Tomorrow would be a big day and she wanted to be well rested and ready for their wedding. Edgar knew he should be sleeping, too, but he couldn't shut his mind off enough to actually rest.

His thoughts were a chaotic maelstrom inside his mind.

Memories of Captain Landon and the terrible things he'd endured at the man's sadistic hand flashed through Edgar's mind, quickly followed by a memory of he and Maude walking along the banks of the Double B, laughing at one thing or another.

The pain and terror Captain Landon inspired within him warred with the feelings of love and joy that washed over him when he thought of Maude. The end result was a confused and tumultuous whirl of thoughts.

The one thing he clung to was that underneath the chaos and disorder in his mind, he loved Maude. He knew he did, and always had. And he suspected he always would.

Edgar had never been great about expressing his feelings, and his issues were making it even more difficult than usual. Unless it was anger—the one emotion he had no difficulty expressing.

Edgar knew he needed to find a way to express his feelings to Maude. He needed to find a way to make her feel loved. To make her feel appreciated, and all of the good, positive feelings he'd always carried in his heart for her.

If he couldn't find a way to make her feel it and show her that he treasured her, he feared he would lose her.

That fear made him think of the scene at the train station. The way he'd reacted to that sudden, sharp noise had left him feeling ashamed. Embarrassed.

He'd cowered like a frightened child. And worst of all, Maude had seen him do it.

As he thought about the look on her face, the confusion and what

he thought looked like disgust, he felt the anger rising up in him. His fury blended with his shame, coalescing into something terrible and dark.

It pulled him down into the gloomy depths and threatened to overwhelm him.

He hated himself for how he'd reacted to the noise. He hated himself for his fear. For his cowardice.

He hated himself for not being braver, and for humiliating himself, not just in front of the people in town, but in front of the woman he loved.

Edgar was angry at himself for that most of all.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to push all of those thoughts away. It was going to take time to let go of those things.

And it was going to take time to adjust to his new life and new reality with Maude. With the love of his life. He knew that.

But he feared she would run out of patience with him before he was able to make the necessary adjustments.

18

The sun was slipping toward the horizon, drawing them ever closer to their wedding, and Maude was trembling with nerves.

She stood at the window and pulled the curtain aside, looking out into the yard at the small crowd that was already gathering for the ceremony.

She recognized most of the people she saw out there—familiar faces from before she'd left for Boston, but hadn't seen in a long time.

She stepped back from the window and turned to the dress that she had laid out on her bed. Picking it up, Maude held it up to herself and stood before the mirror, admiring the simple but elegant design of it.

The lacework that stretched from the high collar down to the cuffs on the sleeves was exquisite. The fabric was still silky soft, even after all this time.

The dress brought back memories of her parents, drawing a small smile across her lips. She recalled the good times and thought about how much she missed them.

Even now, all these years since their passing, she missed them fiercely. Scarcely a day went by that Maude didn't think of them.

It was true that her parents had been tough. At times, they had been hard on her. But they were hard people—they'd had to be, to make a go of it out on the frontier.

They didn't have the time to coddle her, nor did they have the inclination. They knew as well as anybody that life on the fringes required you to be tough.

So, while they perhaps didn't cosset her, they had tried to prepare her for life once she was on her own. And that was something she couldn't fault them for.

That wasn't to say they were perfect, far from it. But, for all their faults and flaws, Maude had still loved them fiercely.

She wished, more than anything, that they could be there with her as she married Edgar. She wished they could give her their blessing and give her away.

And because they weren't, she felt… incomplete. There was a hole in her heart she knew would never be filled.

A soft knock sounded on the door and it opened a moment later. Edgar's mom poked her head in and smiled when she saw Maude standing there, holding the dress up.

She slipped inside and shut the door quietly behind her, then crossed the room. With her hands over her heart, she smiled at Maude.

"You look beautiful, dear. Absolutely beautiful," she said softly.

“Thank you, Mrs.—”

Anna held a finger up as if to remind Maude that they’d already had that conversation. Maude laughed and gave her a nod in return.

“Thank you, Anna,” she amended.

She gave herself one more glance in the mirror before turning and laying the dress on the bed again. Anna took a seat at the small table near the window, so Maude joined her.

They sat in silence for a couple of moments and Maude felt uncomfortable beneath the woman’s quiet scrutiny.

“I remember when you and Edgar were children. There was always something special between the two of you.

“I knew it was only a matter of time before the two of you married,” Anna said softly. “Maybe hoped is a better word for it.

“You’re good for him, Maude. You always have been.”

“Well, if I’ve been good to him, it’s only because he’s been just as good to me over the years, Mrs.—Anna.”

“He’s going to need you now, more than ever. I think you’ve seen that since you’ve been here.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I have.”

Maude’s lips formed a tight line, her mind filled with thoughts about Edgar’s behavior and demeanor.

He could be fun and talkative one moment, just like the man she'd left behind so many years ago, and then fly into a fit of rage with scarcely any provocation the next.

Oh, his rage was never directed at her. He had never, and Maude knew he would never, raise a hand to her. But seeing him so angry and agitated never failed to frighten her.

In between, and the most predominant of his moods, was the sullen silence. He liked to sit out in the orchards for hours at a time, staring off into nothing.

It was as if his body was there physically, but Edgar himself was somewhere far, far away. And, of course, that gloomy silence seemed to be his normal state of being.

He would go long stretches of time without uttering a single word to her. Or to anybody.

It wasn't just that he kept his own counsel, as Maude knew men often tended to do. He simply wasn't there. He wasn't present in the moment.

Maude often tried to get him to talk to her, to open up and share what was going on in his mind. She wanted to help carry his burden.

If they were to wed and be partners in life, it was her responsibility to help him, as it was his to help her.

But whenever she asked, he would usually just walk away without saying anything. On occasion, he would get angry and frustrated if she pressed too hard.

But he never lashed out at her. Instead, he seemed to draw further inward, harder to reach than before.

It was those glimpses of the old Edgar, though, those brief flashes of who he used to be, that kept the embers of hope smoldering within her.

She knew he was still in there, that boy she'd given her heart to so long ago. But he was smothered by the weight of his burdens, accumulated over the years as a soldier and as a prisoner of war.

She couldn't help but wonder what he'd endured that had shattered him into so many different pieces. But wonder was all she could do, since he refused to share.

"I have hope he can be that bright and charming young man again," Anna said.

"I know he's broken right now. But I still hold onto the hope that he can be our Edgar once more."

"He is in there. I've seen it, but only briefly. But I know he's still there," Maude whispered, covering her mouth with her hands.

Anna nodded and Maude could see that her eyes glistened with tears, shimmering in the wan light of the room.

Maude couldn't imagine the pain and torment Anna must have felt since the day Edgar had come home, and silently chastised herself for not thinking of her sooner.

She had begun to realize the pain she bore wasn't hers alone—she saw the pain Anna was silently enduring on her own.

And though Anna's pain was different, Maude thought it had to be even deeper, since this was the man she had given birth to and raised. Anna bore a mother's pain, which was always even more profound than a friend or lover's.

Maude stood and walked around the table, embracing the older woman from behind. She laid her cheek against Anna's and felt her body trembling as the dam of her reserve finally broke and the tears began to flow freely.

They remained like that, Maude hugging Anna from behind, the older woman's hands on her forearms, for several long moments, both of them quietly sharing their pain and their grief, bonding themselves to one another through it.

After a time, Maude stood up and they both dabbed at their eyes with their handkerchiefs, an air of awkward tension filling the room around them.

Maude retook her seat across from Anna and they shared a soft, awkward laugh. Anna reached across the table and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"You've grown into such a strong, beautiful woman," she said softly. "I wish more than anything your mother could be here with us today."

The tears stung Maude's eyes and she looked away as she tried to blink them back. A sad smile touched her lips as she thought that for what was supposed to be such a joyous day, there certainly were a lot of tears.

"I do, too. I miss my parents every single day," she said quietly.

“I know you do, dear. And so do I,” Anna replied. “I’d never presume to be so bold to think that I could ever replace your mother, but I want you to know that you will always have my love and support.

“You’re family now, dear, and I will always be here for you. For whatever you need.”

Maude’s heart swelled and though she still felt the sharp sting of grief lancing her heart, she also felt the warmth of gratitude. More tears welled in her eyes, but these were born of happiness and not just grief.

Anna’s kindness, warmth, and generosity genuinely touched her. It made Maude feel good and as if she belonged somewhere—a feeling she hadn’t had since her parents died.

“Thank you, Anna,” she said softly. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“I want to believe that when we get you settled into your new home, things will be different,” Anna replied.

“That being away from here, and with you, will awaken that part of Edgar that’s been missing since he came back.”

“I hope so. I truly do.”

Anna gave her a warm smile and sat looking into her eyes for a long moment. Maude felt the sense of kinship between them fill her with a sense of joy that was incredibly rare in her life.

“Well, then,” Anna said. “I think it’s about time. Let’s see about getting you ready for your wedding, huh?”

Maude smiled. “Let’s do that.”

Her entire body trembling, her heart hammering hard inside of her, Maude walked down the aisle that had been set up between the rows of chairs.

A man stood under a tree off to the side, playing a sweet-sounding song on a violin. Maude’s throat was dry but her palms were damp, and her entire body felt clammy.

Still, she cleared her throat and kept walking, doing everything she could to tamp down the nerves that were battering her.

At the end of the aisle, Edgar stood waiting for her, dressed in a fine suit that hung well on him. He was clean shaven and had good color in his face.

He wasn’t as pale and drawn as he usually was. Maude thought he looked… healthier. And she thought it suited him.

He looked exceptionally good. Certainly better than at any point since she’d come back to Mayfield.

When she reached him and he looked into her eyes, a small smile playing across his lips, it nearly stole her breath. Maude could see that he was there, fully engaged in the moment with her.

She could see that light of mischief flickering behind his eyes, something she hadn’t seen from him since she had returned. It filled her with a pure light of joy so intense, she almost wanted to cry.

Edgar took both of her hands in his, and as they stood before the pastor on the small dais, Maude felt the powerful waves of the love she felt for him washing over her.

They were so deep and strong, she felt as if they were pulling her under. Maude was content to let herself get lost beneath the surface, drowning in a sea of overwhelming emotion.

It stirred those embers of hope inside of her, stoking them into an inferno that engulfed her. It made Maude confident everything truly would be all right.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she replied. “I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.”

Their hands joined together, they turned as one to face the pastor. Maude smiled and tightened her grip on Edgar’s hand.

He looked over at her and she felt the love he had for her radiating from him like the heat from the sun. She felt whole for the first time in a very long time. Perhaps ever.

“Friends,” the pastor began, “we are gathered here on this very special, very joyous day to join two souls together in the blissful bonds of matrimony…”

The pastor went on, but for Maude, his words faded as she stole glances at Edgar, who was stealing glances of his own. They both shared a smile and his grip on her hand tightened.

Maude’s heart swelled as she thought back to the times they’d shared. She recalled specifically the day down on the banks of the Double B when he’d given her the necklace with the opal pendant

that she still wore.

As if thinking about it imbued it with some sort of energy, the pendant felt warm against her skin.

That day had been terribly tragic, of course. It was the day she'd learned her parents had been killed by the savages.

But it was also the day she had given her heart—wholly, completely, and without reservation—to the man standing by her side.

Maude was realistic enough to know that although today was a good day, not every day would be like this. Edgar was in full control of himself and his emotions. He was present with her. Today.

But there would be some dark, bleak days in the future. Days when Edgar disconnected from her, and from the world.

There would be days when he withdrew and would be lost inside of himself, days he sat in silence with that faraway look in his eyes, like when he was in the orchard.

She pushed those thoughts aside, though, and focused on the man she knew he was. The man she knew he could be again.

That man had been with her through her most difficult times. He had stood by her when her parents had died, lending her his strength and support.

That was the man she knew he was. The man she knew was still inside of him, buried under layers of hurt and pain.

Edgar had always been there for her when she'd needed him most, and she knew that he needed her now. He needed her strength. He needed her support.

It was her turn to be the one who was there for him. She needed to be the bright light that would help lead him out of the darkness.

And as the pastor pronounced them man and wife, to the applause of those gathered, Maude silently vowed to herself that she *would* be there for him, no matter what it took.

She would stand by his side and weather whatever storms came their way. She promised to help Edgar find his way back to himself… and to her.

No matter what it took.

19

The sun was just a thin sliver of gold in the eastern sky, but Edgar was already wide awake. He stared at the ceiling, his stomach churning.

Today was the day his life was going to change forever. Not that marrying Maude hadn't been life-changing, but that had seemed more of an inevitability than something that would truly turn his life on its head.

Of course, he was happy about it. Edgar was thrilled beyond words that Maude was now his bride. And there was a part of him that truly looked forward to a future with her.

For the first time in a very long time, Edgar was feeling slightly optimistic about the future that stretched out before him. A new home, on new land, with his new wife.

There was much to look forward to.

But he still felt the darkness welling inside of him. The old ghosts that had collected within him, that had haunted him for the last few years, hadn't gone anywhere.

They crowded around him, clawing and scratching at him, trying to drag him down into the gloomy, bleak wasteland that marked his existence.

Edgar tried to fight it, gave it everything he had within him, but he wasn't strong enough to stave it off.

That colored everything about his life, and Edgar knew it would wear on Maude. It would take a toll on their marriage.

Eventually, his inability to be the man she had once loved so well would lead to their relationship fraying. Faltering.

Edgar was certain that at some point in the not-too-distant future, Maude would have had enough with his weakness and would leave him.

That seemed as inevitable to him as their wedding.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

He'd been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't even realized she was awake. He cleared his throat and kept his eyes on the ceiling, feeling too awkward to look at her.

"Everything's fine," he replied.

There was a rustling of sheets and, from the corner of his eye, Edgar saw Maude rolling onto her side, her gaze fixed on him. His body stiffened and his stomach churned with tension.

"I just… we didn't… last night," she stammered. "I mean, we're husband and wife now, and we didn't…"

Her voice trailed off, as if she was too embarrassed to finish the sentence. She didn't need to, though. Edgar already knew what was on her mind.

Last night had been their wedding night, and they hadn't consummated their marriage. It wasn't that he didn't want to, but it wasn't that easy, either.

His time as a captive had left him with scars that were as difficult to bear as they were to look at.

Edgar felt the great weight of shame about his appearance pressing down on him. He was not a vain man, but the scars on his body were unsightly.

They were also a reminder to him of every degradation he had suffered at the hands of Captain Landon—of which there were too many to count.

"Do you still find me attractive, Edgar? Do you… desire me?"

Edgar swallowed hard, his insides turning to liquid. Having a conversation about intimate relations was the last thing he wanted to do.

He'd thought it might come up at some point, given that they were husband and wife now and intimacy was a natural part of any marriage. But he hadn't expected it to be so soon, nor did he anticipate that Maude would be the one to raise the issue.

She had always been so squeamish and uncomfortable with the idea of intimacy. Edgar had assumed that he would be the one to eventually broach the subject.

“Of course, I find you attractive. And yes, I desire you,” he replied. “I just…”

Edgar let his voice trail away, not sure what he was going to say. He didn’t know how to explain everything that was in his heart and in his head.

How could he tell her that he felt like a monster, that he felt unworthy of her touch. How could he say that he feared she would recoil if she saw him, saw his scars, all desire for him gone? He didn’t know how to say any of that.

“Then what is it, Edgar? You barely looked at me after the wedding last night.”

He let out a heavy sigh, trying to organize his thoughts into some semblance of coherency. Edgar knew he needed to tell her something, but he wasn’t sure where to begin.

When a knock sounded at the door, he felt terrible for feeling a deep sense of relief.

“Edgar? Maude? Are you up?”

It was his mother calling to them. Of course it was. His father still didn’t say much and still avoided being around him.

At first, it made Edgar feel like he was carrying some infectious disease his father feared catching. He’d taken it personally and it had wounded him.

But, over time, he’d come to see that it was his father’s problem, not his, and if he didn’t want to speak to Edgar, so be it.

Not that it didn't still hurt, but he was better able to compartmentalize it so that when his father walked out of the room, he didn't immediately grow angry and resentful.

"Edgar? Maude?"

"Yes, Ma. We're awake," he called out.

Edgar cast a glance at Maude and saw the hurt in her eyes.

He knew it was an important conversation for them to have, but he wasn't ready to have it just yet. There were things he needed to come to terms with, first.

"All right, well, come on out for breakfast," his mother called through the door. "We'll be wanting to get on the road soon."

"We'll be out shortly, Ma."

As he listened to the sound of his mother's footsteps receding, Edgar slipped out of bed. He pulled a pair of trousers on over his long johns, then retrieved his shirt.

He sat down on the chair against the wall and pulled on his boots. Maude remained in bed, the sheet pulled up to her chest, her eyes fixed on him.

"I promise you, we'll finish that conversation," he said.

"When?" she snapped, her tone sharp.

"Soon. I mean, we've got a lot goin' on today, what with gettin' on the road and all. But, I promise you, we'll talk."

She looked at him, pursing her lips for a long moment. But she finally nodded and tossed the covers back and slipped out of bed.

Edgar watched her as she picked up the dress she had laid out for their travels.

He appreciated the way her shift hugged her generous curves, accentuating the swell of her hips and breasts. His eyes traveled down her legs and he looked at the soft, smooth skin of her toned calves.

As he sat there, admiring her, Edgar felt himself stirring, felt his arousal growing. It told him for sure that the problem was definitely not a lack of desire on his part—the issue was all in his mind.

It was a good realization to have, but Edgar still had no idea now to address it.

She put on her dress and then pulled on her own boots, not bothering to look at or speak to him. It bothered Edgar to no end that he'd hurt her.

The last thing he'd ever wanted to do was hurt Maude. He loved her fiercely. Always had.

The only thing he'd ever wanted was to be with her—to make her happy and to make her feel safe. He was failing on all counts, at the moment, and it was killing him.

Maude said nothing as she left the room, not even looking back as she closed the door behind her. Edgar sat where he was, staring at the door.

He had never felt as alone as he did just then. It was as though he was standing on one side of a great divide and Maude was on the other, and he had no idea how to bridge the gap.

With a sigh, Edgar got to his feet and headed out for breakfast.

The wagons had already been loaded. His father and some of the men from town had gotten everything ready for their journey yesterday.

There was a piece of Edgar, the petty part of his mind, that thought his father had gotten everything packed up so quickly and efficiently to expedite his departure.

Edgar figured that, from his father's perspective, the sooner he was gone, the better. It was a thought that filled him with both anger and sadness.

Edgar stood off to the side, watching his parents saying goodbye. It had been agreed that his mother would come out to their homestead with them to help them get settled in.

It was, as far as Edgar knew, the first time they had been apart since they married. And he had never seen the sort of affection between them that he was seeing now.

They embraced tightly, clinging to one another with a sort of desperation, as if it was to be the last time they were going to see each other. In that moment, he envied the sort of closeness and love that was plainly evident between them.

He glanced over at Maude, who had been looking back at him but

quickly turned away, as if embarrassed to have been caught staring.

He wanted to go to her and pull her into an embrace. Wanted to somehow make things all right between them again, and prove to her how much he loved her.

But he wasn't sure that would be welcome at the moment, and so he remained where he was.

When his mother finally stepped back from his father, she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. He felt terrible for splitting his parents up like he was doing and had half a mind to tell her to stay.

The truth of the matter was that he was glad to have that buffer between himself and Maude. She'd act as a sort of neutral middle ground between them, to help facilitate their getting to know each other again after all the years that had separated them.

He was glad that his mother was going with them for a lot of reasons. But most of all because he knew that if there was any chance of him being able to nurture the seeds of love that had been planted between himself and Maude, helping them to flourish and grow, he needed his mother's help.

Edgar felt ridiculous acknowledging that he needed his mother's help for something that should be so basic, but it was the truth. It pained him to admit it, even if only to himself.

If left to his own devices, he would make a hash of everything and Maude would be back in Mayfield without him before the first fortnight was up. Until Edgar was able to come to terms with everything inside of him, he couldn't be trusted to do right by her.

At least he was self-aware enough to realize that. It wasn't much, but he thought it was something.

His father walked across the yard to where he was standing. Edgar stood up a little straighter and steeled himself for whatever was about to come.

His father stopped a few feet away, looking down at the ground and kicking at a dirt clod near the toe of his boot. He cleared his throat and gave himself a small nod, as if coming to a decision in his mind.

When he raised his eyes and Edgar saw a complex tangle of emotions within their depths. "You've got a long ride ahead of you," he said.

Edgar nodded. "Few days at least, I expect."

"You're gonna be passin' through some Injun territory. You got your rifles and plenty of ammunition?"

"Yeah. Got plenty of both in the wagon," he said. "Sidearms, too."

"Good. That's good."

Edgar nodded, though inwardly he shuddered at the thought of having to use his weapon. Once he'd gotten home after being released from captivity, Edgar had vowed that he would never take a life again.

He never wanted to see his rifle again, if he was being honest with himself. But he had to admit to the necessity of having it on hand on the trip to their new home in Yellowstone Valley.

There were plenty of Indians on the trail from Mayfield, and though most of them were peaceful, he knew there was a possibility that they could be attacked. And if they were, he was going to have to defend Maude and his mother.

The idea of shooting to kill sent a shudder of revulsion through him, but that was just the way of things out on the frontier.

“I know things have been tough on you since you got back. Hell, in truth, they were even tougher on you before you got back,” his father said. “And I know I ain’t been very communicative with you.”

“No. You haven’t.”

His father frowned. “It’s because I didn’t know what to say. What to do,” he said. “I know you were goin’ through some stuff and I know you were dealin’ with everything you endured.

“I didn’t know what to say to help you. Honestly, I figured I’d just make things worse if I tried talkin’ to you about it all.”

Edgar shrugged. “You coulda tried.”

His father sighed. “I suppose I could’ve. And I guess that’s my failing. I’m sorry for that, son.”

The fact that this was, by far, the most his father had spoken with him since he’d returned home was not lost on Edgar. His father was stiff and his words sounded wooden. But the fact that his father was speaking to him at all was something.

He wasn’t sure what it was, since it had come only when he was leaving, but he felt almost as if his father was reaching out. As if he

was trying to bridge the divide that had existed between them since Edgar had returned home.

“You’re startin’ a new life. New bride. New home. And, God willin’, your own family soon enough,” he said. “I can’t imagine what you went through when you were a prisoner in that camp. I won’t even pretend to.

“But I will say that you’re goin’ to have to deal with whatever it is that has you so twisted up, Edgar.”

“If only it were that easy.”

He shrugged. “Never said it was, or would be. But if you keep on like you are right now, you’re goin’ to send that young lady packin’ and runnin’ for home before you can blink.

“And if you have kids… forget it. You can’t be like you’ve been lately, son. You just can’t.”

“I know that, Pa. Don’t you think I know that?”

His father’s expression was one of consternation. “To be honest, I don’t know what’s runnin’ around in that head of yours, son. I wish I did.

“All I do know is that you’ve got a fine woman there as your bride. And you need to get yourself right for her sake, if not for your own.

“She deserves to have you whole and complete. And right now, all she’s got are pieces.”

Edgar sighed. He knew his father was right. Everything he’d said

was correct. The trouble was, Edgar had no idea how to go about picking up all of those pieces and making himself whole again.

“I don’t mean to come down on you, or make you feel worse than I know you already feel. I just feel I’d be remiss in my duties as your pa if I didn’t tell you these things.

“Believe it or not, I want to see you happy, son. I want you to live a long and happy life. Ah, hell, you know I’m not any good at this kind of thing.

“I just wanted to tell you that you’ve got a lot of good things in your life right now. Do what you have to do to make the most of ‘em.”

A small smile touched Edgar’s lips. He respected his father more than anybody else in the world. And his opinion mattered to Edgar more than he could say.

He appreciated what his father was saying and trying to do. His father, ever the pragmatist, thought that giving him a cold dose of reality would help snap him out of the dark place he was mired in.

Edgar knew it wouldn’t. But he appreciated the effort all the same.

His father pulled him into a tight embrace. Edgar hugged him in return, feeling his heart swell. After thumping him hard on the back a couple of times, his father stepped back, wiping at his red-rimmed eyes.

Edgar had never seen this sort of raw emotion from his father before and he found it a little disconcerting. But not unwelcome.

“Get on back here now and then, would you?” his father said.

“Don’t you go forgettin’ about us.”

“I won’t, Pa.”

“And live the best life you can out there, son. Be a good man to that wife of yours. She deserves the moon. And don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t.”

His father looked at him for a long moment, then nodded and turned away. He stalked across the yard and disappeared inside the house, the screen door banging shut behind him.

Edgar walked to the wagon and helped his mother up onto the bench of the wagon she’d be driving, and got her settled and ready to ride out.

He was a little nervous about her driving the second wagon all by herself, but there was no other choice. Besides, he knew she was as capable a woman as they came.

After that, he helped Maude up onto the bench of their wagon, and climbed up to drop down beside her. She looked over at him, then pointedly at the house where his father had disappeared.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

He nodded. “Everything’s fine.”

Edgar wanted to say more, but he couldn’t find the right words. Instead, he remained silent and got the wagons moving.

Edgar swallowed hard as they started on a journey that would

forever change his life.

“It is beautiful,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything even half as beautiful as this before. It’s truly magnificent.”

Maude had woken up that morning in a good mood, their argument the day before seemingly forgotten. She had been warm, friendly, and solicitous all day so far.

It was confusing to Edgar simply because she had passed most of the previous day in a sullen silence.

Now, it was as if somebody had flipped a switch inside of her, shutting off the anger or sadness, or whatever it was and turning her happier side on. Edgar wasn’t sure that he would ever understand Maude, or women in general.

They crested a rise a day out of Mayfield and Edgar tried to soothe his nerves by losing himself in the natural beauty of the world around them. It seemed that with every mile away from Mayfield they traveled, the more pensive he became.

Far from being the adventure Maude was obviously seeing it as, traveling through these strange lands, away from everything that was familiar and comfortable to him, was heightening Edgar’s tension.

“Don’t you think it’s beautiful?” she pressed.

The road they traveled along cut through endless fields of tall grass that swayed in the wind, making it look like a vast green ocean.

The grass was dotted with more white flowers than he could count, and the sun overhead glittered off a wide, winding river. In the distance, Edgar saw the snow-capped peaks of dark, craggy mountains.

A cool wind blew through, ruffling his hair and clothes. High overhead, he spotted a few hawks circling, looking for prey far below them on the ground.

Unease rippled through Edgar as he fought the urge to turn back and head for Mayfield—an urge that grew ever stronger with every mile they passed.

“Edgar?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s beautiful.”

And it was. The entire view was gorgeous. Breathtaking. Inspiring. He just wished he could embrace and enjoy it as much as Maude obviously was.

“I’ve never been this far west before. My parents never took me with them on their supply runs,” she said, grinning widely. “I had no idea it was so beautiful and peaceful out here.”

Edgar blew out a long breath, doing his best to push away the voice in his head, as well as the echo of the words his father had spoken to him the day they’d left Mayfield.

He needed to do right by Maude. No matter what was going through his own mind or the problems he was grappling with, Edgar knew he needed to put it all aside and focus on Maude’s happiness.

Not everything was about him, and he knew he needed to do a better job of making her feel valued. Treasured. Happy.

“I’ve heard it’s even more beautiful in the Yellowstone Valley. I understand our house backs up to a pond on the land. Got a river that flows through it, too,” Edgar said.

“Plenty of land for horses and other livestock. My uncle says the views are breathtakin’.”

“I can’t wait to see it. I mean, Mayfield has a certain beauty about it, of course,” she chirped. “But I can’t wait to see our new home.

“I can’t wait to see the land it sits on. If it looks anything like this, I’m going to be really happy.”

She had such an energy about her, Edgar couldn’t help but be affected by it. It was infectious.

The longer she chattered on about everything they were seeing and expressed her awe about the natural beauty, the more it was like the clouds were beginning to part and the sunshine was beginning to rain down on him.

Slowly, he felt his own mood begin to lighten. All of the dark, gloomy thoughts that had been crowding his mind all morning, weighing him down, began to lift.

The trepidation that had hung heavy over his shoulders since they set out from Mayfield began to ease up. It wasn’t long before he stopped fighting it and felt an actual smile on his face.

He loved seeing the world through Maude’s eyes. She had such a childlike innocence about her that he found entirely appealing.

It drew him in and filled him with a sense of wonder that matched her own. He saw things in a very different way than he normally would, and it lifted his heart out of the darkness it seemed to dwell in.

He liked that Maude could have this affect on him. She could help pull him out of his mind, pull him out of the poisoned waters of his own heart, and give him some respite from the memories that plagued him.

It was nothing she did, nothing she tried to do. It was simply a matter of who she was. She had a way about her that helped put his mind, and his heart at ease, if only temporarily.

But those small breaks from the darkness that so often consumed him were welcome. And he found himself looking more and more forward to them.

It gave Edgar some small hope that he could be redeemed, after all —that he could learn to lay his burdens down and love life, and Maude, the way he used to.

Freely and openly, and without the tinge of darkness that now corrupted everything in his life.

He wanted that to be the permanent way of things. He wanted to live his life like he used to be, not as he was.

His father was right, Maude deserved better. *He* deserved better himself.

Edgar knew deep down in his bones that if they were going to have any chance at a happy life together, he needed to purge the darkness from his mind and his heart.

He just didn’t know how to do that. Not yet.

But as he listened to Maude going on and on about the scenery before them and the beauty of the world they were passing through, he vowed to himself that he would do everything in his power to figure it out.

He would find his way out of the dark and back into the light. He would find a way to be strong for her. A way to be the man he used to be, and the man she deserved.

He vowed to himself that he would figure out how to give Maude the life and the happiness she so richly deserved.

20

Maude frowned as the wagon trundled through the center of town, such as it was. The town they had left behind had been booming, with new buildings and shops being built, and people flooding in from everywhere.

Mayfield was going to be one of the biggest cities in the Wyoming Territory, once they gained statehood.

It truly was becoming a marvel that, while perhaps would never reach the status of Boston, Philadelphia, or Charleston, would eventually become something substantial in its own right.

The town of Wellington Flats, on the other hand, the town that was to be their new home, was on the opposite end of the spectrum.

With a rough-looking saloon filled with even rougher-looking people, a sheriff's station and town jail, a general store, and a few other scattered shops—some of them little more than canvas constructions—Wellington Flats was little more than a frontier outpost.

Mayfield hadn't even been this desolate when she'd left for Boston. This place looked like little more than a wide spot in the road

people passed through on their way to other—better—places.

Places that weren't just trying to scratch out a living, and were barely getting by. Places that might not wither and die out with the first hardship that came along.

Droughts, disease, livestock loss, Indian raids—they were all part of life out on the frontier. One had to be able to cope with them to live out on the fringes. And not just cope with them, but thrive in spite of them.

Mayfield had indeed established itself as a town that could flourish in the face of adversity. And there had been plenty.

Wellington Flats, on the other hand, looked like a place that would die on the vine and blow away with a strong breeze.

Maude turned on the bench and looked back at Anna, who was still driving the second wagon, and could tell by the look on her face that she was thinking the same thing she was.

It wasn't very comforting and Maude felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach.

As they drove through the makeshift town, the people who walked along cast dark glances at them. Maude gave them all a pleasant smile in greeting, but received none in return.

After that, she tried to ignore them. She knew firsthand, from life in Mayfield, that people didn't trust strangers and didn't take kindly to outsiders.

Small towns were often insular and cloistered in ways big cities weren't. In a big city like Boston, strangers were the norm, and

weren't viewed much differently than somebody who'd lived there for a generation.

Big cities drew people from all over, and there was always a steady influx of newcomers. They were no more remarkable than the sun rising in the east.

In a place like Wellington Flats, or even Mayfield for that matter, strangers were an oddity and something to be feared—until they proved that they weren't.

It took a long time and a lot of effort, sometimes over many years, before one was no longer considered an outsider and were welcomed into the community. It made transitions into new towns difficult, but it was just how things were.

"What do you think?"

Edgar's voice, cutting into her thoughts after he'd spent the last couple of hours in a sullen silence, gave her a start. She tore her eyes away from the people who seemed to be scowling at her and turned to Edgar.

She cleared her throat and tried to put a smile on her face, hoping it didn't look nearly as false as it felt.

"It's… smaller than I thought it would be," she replied evenly.

He shrugged. "It is. But that's the way it is out here on the frontier. Towns scrabblin' to get a foothold," he said. "But I've got a good feelin' about this place."

Maude looked around again, trying to see what Edgar was seeing… and couldn't. There wasn't much to see. Nor was there much of a

sense of hope, really.

Maude couldn't fathom what it was Edgar saw that gave him such a good feeling.

"Mayfield wasn't so different not all that long ago," he stated. "Small, desperate place that teetered on the edge of extinction."

Maude pursed her lips. "I don't recall Mayfield ever being so… small. Or so worn-looking."

He chuckled to himself. "Maybe not when you and I lived there. But it started off just like this. My pa used to tell me about it.

"You never knew from one day to the next if the town was going to survive," he said. "But it did. And you saw what Mayfield's becoming with your own two eyes."

Maude nodded, conceding the point. "I suppose so. And I can't deny that Mayfield is becoming grand in its own right."

"This here is the western edge of the country. The frontier. Places out here are just getting a toehold and are trying to carve out their own little spot," he said, casting a glance at her.

"It may never be a Boston or one of them big cities, but Wellington Flats could become just like Mayfield. In time."

Maude knew it would take a long while for that to happen. It might not even happen in their lifetimes. But she knew that Edgar was right… it *could* happen.

The edge of the country was being pushed ever westward, and this was among those places that were the point of that spear. It was

just going to take time to establish itself.

She looked over at Edgar to find him smiling wide—an honest-to-goodness smile filled with warmth. And his tone was dripping with a sense of optimism that she hadn't heard from him since before she'd left Mayfield for Boston.

He seemed so much more like the man she'd given her heart to that she couldn't help but share in his optimism and joy.

Or, at least, not bank the fire of those feelings he was expressing. She wanted to encourage them. Nurture them.

"This town would be wonderful if it grew up and established itself like Mayfield," Maude said, affecting a tone of joy in her own voice. "Do you think they would ever put in a theater? I would very much like that."

Edgar laughed and his eyes sparkled with a life that was all too rare for her liking. But then he surprised her by leaning over and planting a kiss on her cheek.

She flushed with warmth and her heart turned a somersault inside of her. The smile on her face stretched from ear to ear.

"If they don't, we'll build a theater for you ourselves. How about that?" he declared.

"That sounds wonderful to me," she replied.

Edgar laughed as they followed the road and passed through the town proper, rumbling along the pitted dirt track that would lead them to their new home.

Maude grinned, reveling in the sense of joy that radiated from Edgar… and hoping it would last for a while, at least.

"Is that our land? Is it *all* our land?"

He nodded. "Well, not all of it, but a good chunk of it is."

They'd just crested a small rise, about half an hour outside of Wellington Flats, and were on the downslope when Edgar pointed out a large ranch-style home that stood among fields that stretched as far as the eye could see.

A sizable pond ringed with trees stood behind the house, and beyond that copse of trees, Maude saw the sun glinting off the surface of a winding river that cut through their land.

Wildflowers cast in more colors than Maude had ever seen before stood out in the tall grass and swayed gently in the breeze. It was simply breathtaking.

She looked over at Edgar, the smile on her face wide, warm, and genuine. "It's beautiful, Edgar. Simply beautiful," she said.

"It sure is a lot prettier than I expected it to be," he replied.

They drove the wagons down a long road that branched off the main thoroughfare they'd been traveling, pulling into the large yard that sat in front of a house that was a lot bigger and nicer than Maude had expected, given the condition of the town they'd passed through.

Whereas the structures in Wellington Flats had been weathered

and beaten-looking, this home was pristine.

Edgar jumped down off the wagon, then turned and helped Maude down. She fidgeted, bouncing on the balls of her feet, excited to explore the house, but she wanted to wait for him.

He chuckled, looking from her to the house and back again. The twinkle in his eye told him he knew what she was wanting.

“Go ahead and take a look inside,” he said. “I’m going to help my mother down off the wagon.”

She jumped forward and planted a kiss on his cheek, then turned and dashed off. Maude streaked across the yard and burst through the door, into the main room of the home.

It was big and filled with windows, giving her a view of the front as well as the back. She gazed at the pond she’d glimpsed from the road and smiled.

It was picturesque and gorgeous, and Maude was already picturing herself out there in the summer with the sun raining down on her, a cool breeze blowing through her hair as she sat on the bank, reading a book.

To the left of the home’s great room was a kitchen that had a working pump in the sink and a wood-burning stove that looked brand new. It had a lot of counter space as well as cupboards.

A door in the back wall led to what she assumed would be the pantry and cold room. Her stomach fluttered and her heart was dancing wildly inside of her as she explored the three rooms in the back of the house.

She found her way to a mudroom and stepped through the door, breathing in the sweet aroma in the air and smiling. The pond lay in front of her, and to the right was a pair of small cottages.

Feeling as giddy as a child, she dashed over to the first one and went inside. Much to her surprise, she found it was a small home.

Obviously not as large as their home, but the cottage had a small kitchen area just off the main room that held a large hearth, and there was one bedroom in the back.

She assumed this was where Anna would be staying while they got themselves settled in, but she didn't know what the second little cottage was to be used for.

Maude was glad that she would have her own private space, as well as a place to call her own. Still, she was grateful that Anna had come along and was going to help them get set up here.

She knew there would be difficult days with Edgar ahead, and having his mother there with them, to help smooth the waters, was a godsend as far as Maude was concerned.

She had been able to reach Edgar in ways that Maude had not been able to, and she was hoping the older woman could teach her how to do that.

Anna wouldn't be with them forever, so Maude needed to figure out how to calm Edgar down when he got into one of his moods.

She had to learn how to handle him and, perhaps, find some ways they could both work their way back to each other when things got difficult.

Maude knew it was a lot of responsibility to put on Anna, and that it wasn't going to be easy. She knew already that Anna didn't have the answers to all of her questions and, in many ways, was still learning how to handle Edgar herself.

But she'd had months of experience that Maude hadn't, so anything her mother-in-law could offer would be of enormous help to her.

Hearing voices over by the large barn, Maude made her way over and found Edgar and Anna in the company of a large, burly older man.

He was a hair taller than Edgar, wide through the chest and shoulders, and had thick arms, a grizzled beard that was as white as snow, and keen blue eyes.

His skin was tawny, as if he spent a lot of time outside, and he had the look of a man well-accustomed to hard work.

The three of them turned as she entered the barn, and the stranger pulled the brim of his hat down and nodded to her by way of greeting.

"Maude, this is Mr. Tavers. Mr. Tavers, this is my wife, Maude," Edgar introduced them.

"Mr. Tavers is our neighbor up the road a piece. He's been keepin' an eye on our home and livestock until we arrived."

"Pleasure to meet ya, ma'am," Tavers said.

"Please, call me Maude," she replied. "And the pleasure is all mine. We appreciate you looking after things for us."

“Not a problem at all. It’s what neighbors do,” he said, then turned to Edgar. “Your uncle wanted me to tell you he wasn’t able to get to the fencing… had some big work to do up in Cheyenne, so he and his crew had to light out.

“But he marked out the boundaries so you know where your land ends and Harry Melton’s begins.”

“Much obliged, Mr. Tavers,” Edgar said.

“Once we get settled in, we’d love to have you over for supper,” Anna said. “To thank you for everything you’ve done, and so we can all get to know each other.”

“I’d be obliged. Seems like it’s been forever since I’ve had a good home-cooked meal,” he said with a deep baritone chuckle.

“I’m afraid I’m not much good in the kitchen. My Lizzie always handled that.”

Maude felt a stab of pain for him. “Oh, did she…”

He nodded. “About five years ago now. She was a lunger,” he said, a note of sadness in his voice. “I’m just glad she’s not in pain no more.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Anna said, a sentiment that Maude quickly echoed.

A sad smile touched his lips. “You get used to things after a spell,” he replied. “Only thing I ain’t gotten used to is ramblin’ around in that big ol’ house by myself.”

“So you had no children?” Anna asked.

He nodded. “Oh, yeah, had three boys and a girl. Lost two of my boys to the war. Third one moved to New York, and my little girl got married and is living somewhere in Georgia now,” he said, that sadness in his voice thick.

“I’m so sorry,” Anna said. “That’s such a terrible thing.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “It’s the way of life, I suppose,” he replied, then put a smile on his face, trying to brush off the despair. “Anyway, I should shuffle on.

“Edgar, we’ll get together and talk sometime. If you’re gonna set up a ranch here, I can give you the lay of the land—tell you where to get your horses, feed, and the like.”

“I’d sure appreciate it,” he responded.

They all shook hands with Mr. Tavers and Maude watched as the big man mounted his horse with a grace and fluidity that surprised her. She guessed that he was a man as well used to riding as he was to hard work.

He seemed to be a reflection of the town of Wellington Flats itself —tough and hard-scrabbled. Maude thought like most men in those frontier towns, he was unwilling to give himself over to his grief and pain.

He was unwilling to quit. And if that truly was the character of the town, Maude could see why Edgar felt so optimistic about it.

“So? How was the house?” he asked.

Maude smiled. “It’s more and better than I dared dream of it being.”

Edgar nodded as he looked around the barn, nodding to himself. “Uncle Jack did a great job here.”

“He did,” Anna agreed. “And we’re going to need to think of a proper way to thank him for all he did.”

Maude looked around at the barn. Like the house, everything was new and very solid-looking. It smelled of hay and livestock, but it was strangely not an offensive odor.

Apparently, Mr. Tavers had been mucking out the stalls for them, which she thought was more than kind. She liked the burly older man; there was an openness and honesty about him that was appealing.

“So, what do you think?” Anna asked.

Edgar nodded. “Still got a lot of work to do around here to make this a working ranch. Getting that border fencing up is priority number one,” he said.

“But I really like it here. I think I can be happy here.”

Happy. It was a word Maude hadn’t associated with Edgar for quite some time, so she was more than glad to hear him say it. She knew she could be happy out there, as well. Very happy.

She still had her misgivings about the town itself, as it seemed to cater to a more hardened crowd.

But everything Edgar had said when he’d compared it to Mayfield, and knowing that good people like Mr. Tavers existed there had combined to make her feel better about things.

The lowing of the dozen head of cattle in the paddock behind the barn drifted to her ears and made her smile. It was a pleasant sound.

Maude thought it was the sound of a new start for her, and for Edgar. It was the sound of the beginning of this new life and new adventure they were starting—together.

21

"No, over there, I think. In front of the hearth," Maude said.

After stabling all of their horses and caring for them, they'd all turned to the home. As Anna got herself settled into the guest cottage, Edgar and Maude had started bringing in all of the furniture they had brought with them from Mayfield.

After she'd laid down a large rug in front of the hearth, Edgar had set up the pair of rockers she had brought from her family's home.

As he set the small table down between them, he recalled the many hours they had whiled away together sitting in those chairs in front of the hearth in her parents' house after they'd died.

They'd sometimes talked about everything, and other times, they'd sat in a companionable silence together.

Just being there with her had helped her during what he knew was the most difficult time in her life. He'd helped her heal, or to at least move past it and move forward.

Edgar knew well, perhaps better than most, there were some

wounds that never actually healed.

“How’s this?” he asked.

“It’s perfect.”

They walked back outside to grab another load of things to bring in. The work went on most of the day, and by the time they were done hauling everything in and getting it all set up, Edgar felt whooped.

The journey there had been long, and it seemed there was still so much to be done. But what he wanted in that moment was to clean up, have a hot meal, and fall into bed to sleep for the next twenty-four hours.

“I’m gonna put a fire on in the stove,” Edgar announced. “We’ll get a little water heated so we can all wash up.”

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

Over the course of the afternoon, Edgar had felt himself sliding back down into the dark place.

He’d felt himself withdrawing as they worked, and by the time they’d finished for the night, the smile that had been on his face for much of the day had fallen.

More than that, the sense of happiness and optimism that had marked his attitude earlier in the day had evaporated, as well. Like a puff of smoke on the breeze, it was just gone.

Without meaning to, he had gone quiet and wrapped that cloak of ambivalence around himself again, shutting Maude out in the

process.

He knew it hurt her and he wanted to beat himself for it. But there was nothing he could do. Edgar felt entirely powerless in the face of the darkness.

He got the fire started in the hearth, and then another one in the stove, putting on a pan he'd filled from the water pump in the sink. After the great room started to warm up, he went into the back rooms, disappearing from view.

Edgar was ostensibly moving some things around, but he figured that Maude suspected he wanted to be alone and didn't intrude on his time. She was intuitive, and he appreciated that about her.

The day had overwhelmed him more than he'd anticipated, and he just needed to get away from everybody for a little while. His mind was screaming for a break every bit as much as his body did.

Being around people for too long took a toll on him. There were times he just needed to be alone.

His mother often said it wasn't healthy, but it was the only way he knew to relax himself enough that he could beat back the darkness that threatened to pull him under.

He moved a couple of things around in what was now their bedroom, getting things situated and comfortable. At least, he hoped Maude would find it comfortable.

After arranging things where he wanted them, he sat down on the bench beneath the window and looked at their new world beyond the glass.

The moon was full and fat overhead, casting the world in a silvery luminescence. It shone brightly off the surface of the pond behind the house, making the ring of trees and shrubs around it seem to almost glow with a mysterious and unearthly light.

It was beautiful.

Beyond that, Edgar could see the fields, and he thought about everything that needed to be done. There was a lot of hard work in his future, but he was strangely excited by it.

Physical work not only kept the body busy, but the mind as well. It also had a way of helping things sort themselves out.

This was something he'd noticed when he worked at the factory back in Mayfield all those years ago.

It had been hard after Maude left for Boston, but the tedious and monotonous work at the factory had kept him occupied so he couldn't dwell too much on her.

Eventually, he had been able to find a sense of peace with the situation, and it had helped settle his mind. Somewhat, at least.

He hoped the same would happen with the work he needed to put in to get this ranch up and working.

The hard crash followed by Maude's muffled curse from the other room startled him, immediately pulling Edgar out of his thoughts. He jumped to his feet and ran from the bedroom out to the front room to find Maude standing there, cradling her hand.

A box lay at her feet, toppled over, its contents scattered across the floor. She looked up at him with a grimace on her face.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded. “Splinter,” she replied, holding up her hand.

“Better let me have a look at it.”

“It’s nothing,” she said through gritted teeth.

Edgar crossed the room and looked down at her hand, noticing the thick drop of blood welling at the point where the splinter had gone into her flesh.

“Have a seat by the hearth so I can get that thing out of your hand,” he said. “You don’t want that getting infected.”

“Really, it’s nothing. It just surprised me, is all. I’m all right,” she said.

“Even small wounds can take infection. And believe me when I say an infection often isn’t pretty. It can do some terrible things,” he insisted.

And it was true. Perhaps not from a simple splinter, but in the camp, he’d seen his share of men develop an infection.

It could rot the flesh to the point a limb had to be taken off completely. The thing he remembered most about it was the stench that surrounded an infected wound—a smell that was even worse than the odor of rotting meat.

No matter how hard he tried to banish the memory from his mind, he couldn’t do it. It remained stuck in his mind like—well, like a splinter stuck beneath his skin.

“Come,” he said. “Sit down in the rocker. Let me collect a few things.”

Maude took a seat in her rocker and sat back, letting the warmth of the fire wash over her. She gave him a smile as he turned and walked out of the room.

Edgar had to go through a couple of boxes before he found everything he was looking for, then set it all out on a tray.

He wasn’t much of a medic, but he’d learned a few things while in captivity, and had developed some small bit of skill in tending to wounds.

Edgar came back into the room carrying a tray with a bowl of water, some tweezers, bandages, and a bottle of peroxide. He set it down on the table, then pulled the other rocker over closer to Maude’s chair and took a seat.

The soft, flickering glow from the fire in the hearth lent her skin a color and a warmth that made her even more beautiful to him than he already thought she was.

He wished more than anything that he had it in him to tell her that. He thought she needed to hear it from his lips.

But whenever he opened his mouth to tell her anything like that, or to discuss how he felt about her, his mouth dried up and his words failed him.

Edgar took her hand and laid it gently in his lap, relishing the warmth and smoothness of her skin, then dabbed the clean cloth into the bowl of water and washed away the blood that had pooled in her palm.

The way she looked into his eyes sent a current of heat running from the crown of his head to the tip of his toe, warming up all the places in between.

Trying to ignore the stirring in his loins, he set the rag down and picked up the tweezers, then looked up and held her gaze firmly. He gazed into her dark, almost bottomless eyes and felt the heat within him growing even more intense.

He stroked her palm gently with his thumb, almost unaware he was even doing it. She drew in a small breath and bit down on her bottom lip, her gaze never wavering.

The popping wood in the hearth and the crackle of the fire were the only sounds in the room, but Edgar was sure the thundering of his heart was drowning them both out. It roared in his ears so loud, he was certain Maude could hear it.

Their eyes remained locked for a long moment and the room around them took on the feeling of the air right before a lightning strike.

The hair on Edgar's arms and the back of his neck stood straight up and he was certain he was going to kiss her. She licked her lips.

He could tell that Maude was anticipating the feel of his mouth on hers. Perhaps even longing for it.

There was nothing in the world he wanted more in that moment than to kiss her. To feel her body pressed to his as they lost themselves in the heat and passion of the moment.

He wanted to give himself over to her, as he wanted her to give herself over to him. In that moment, nothing else in the world

existed for him but her.

He could tell that the same thoughts were running through her mind—he saw the same look of anticipation in her eyes that he knew was reflected in his own.

Edgar thought about leaning forward and taking the initiative. He knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He longed for her touch, as she longed for his.

But the fear of rejection and his shame over his disfigurement reared their heads again and it felt as if the world was crashing down upon him.

Knowing he would see revulsion in her eyes if she saw him without clothes was his biggest fear, and it was suffocating. He felt as if he couldn't breathe, and that his heart was already breaking.

If Maude couldn't accept him as he was, he knew nobody in this world could. And if that were the case, he might as well find a tall tree and hang himself from it.

At least if he didn't disrobe in front of her, he wouldn't have to see the inevitable expression of disgust and suffer that humiliation.

He gave her a wavering smile and lowered his eyes, bending low over her hand and taking the tweezers off the tray. As he did, Edgar felt her body stiffen.

He knew he'd disappointed her—again. He'd upset her. And it hurt him as much as it hurt her, but Edgar didn't know how to set things right.

Nor did he know how to explain that what was happening between

them—or, more specifically, what *wasn't* happening—wasn't her fault. It really had little to do with her at all.

What was happening was because of him. These issues were all in his own mind. Edgar knew and accepted this, but he had no idea how to start fixing them.

He hoped the hard physical labor of getting his ranch up and running would help, but that was something that would take time.

And as he stole a glance at Maude and saw the expression of hurt mixed with anger painted upon her face, he didn't know if time was a luxury he had.

"This might hurt a bit," he murmured.

She tensed and let out a soft gasp as he used the tweezers to dig the splinter out of her hand, but otherwise bore it stoically. Pinching it between the prongs of the tweezers, he held it up for her to see.

"Pretty good-sized piece of wood," he remarked.

She gave him a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. With a quiet sigh, he set the tweezers and the splinter down on the tray, then used the cloth to wash the area off again.

After that, he poured a little peroxide onto the small wound, then wrapped it in clean bandages. When he was done, Maude pulled her hand back and suddenly got to her feet.

"Thank you for your help. I appreciate it," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I'll get some supper on."

Edgar reached out to grab her good hand before she walked away, but she was already gone. He hung his head for a moment and silently kicked himself for being such an idiot.

With nothing else he could do, Edgar cleaned up the mess and went back to the bedroom. He set the tray on the dresser and dropped back down onto the bench at the window, staring out at the darkness beyond the glass.

Things between them had been great all day long. He'd felt closer to her than he had since she'd come back to Mayfield.

He wanted to believe that things were starting to turn around. But no matter how good they seemed, he still felt there was a pane of glass between them—like the window.

He could see her through it; he could see all of her wants and desires. But, try as he might, he couldn't break through that glass to make them real.

Still, he had to do or say something to mollify her. He wanted her to understand what was happening in his own mind, and why he was acting the way he was.

The problem was him, he just needed her to be patient. He knew they should finish the talk they'd started back in Mayfield just a few days ago.

With his mind still trying to sabotage him, Edgar got to his feet. He forced himself to leave the room, step by shuffling step, and walked into the main part of the house.

His stomach tightened and the fear flowing freely through him as he sought to talk to his wife was more powerful than in any of the

battles he'd been part of.

Edgar's legs felt like steel and he sat down once again in his chair before the hearth. He would talk to her. Tonight. Now.

He just needed to figure out how to do it, and what to say.

From the kitchen, he heard Maude sniffle, as if she'd been crying, and it only drove the feelings of self-loathing and hopelessness even deeper into him. But then he heard a sharp cracking noise.

It sounded like a gunshot. It made Edgar flinch as it dredged up all of the other unpleasant memories, and set them running through his mind once again.

Another sharp cracking noise made him wince and duck his head, as if he expected to feel a physical blow.

Panic gripped him tightly and he felt like he needed to get out of there. Suddenly, the room seemed far too small.

The ghostly sound of echoing voices drifted through his head, and the smell of burned, rotten meat filled his nostrils.

His eyes grew wide as all around him, he saw the faces of the men he'd been stuck in the cellar with… some of them dead, some of them not.

Edgar's breath quickened as his heart raced. Sweat poured from his brow, rolled down his back, and he heard a small, low whimpering sound filling his ears, belatedly realizing the noises were coming from him.

He tried to bite back the terror that was coursing through him like

a raging river, but couldn't stem the tide.

Another sharp crack and Edgar shot to his feet so abruptly, he knocked the chair over behind him. It hit the floor with a loud clattering noise that sounded like the door to the cellar slamming shut, sealing them into the dull gloom once more.

"Edgar? Are you all right?"

On some level, he knew it was Maude's voice. It was only Maude. But the larger part of his mind told him something else.

He was right back on the battlefield; he heard the cannons firing, the crackle of the rifles, the screams of the men who lay dying in the blood-soaked mud. He heard it all as clearly as he'd ever heard anything.

"Edgar," the voice rang in his ears again. "It's all right. You're at home, Edgar. You're safe, honey."

An explosion sounded in his mind. Close. Too close. He heard himself yelling something, but the words were too unintelligible for him to make them out.

Edgar felt the dirt and rocks raining down on him. The enemy was closing in. They were coming. And if he didn't move, they were going to kill him.

Edgar was nearly blind with fear and he felt dizzy, as if he might pass out.

But then, he felt a pair of hands on him. Felt himself being shaken. And he heard Maude's voice.

“Edgar. Edgar, come back to me,” she cried, her voice thick with emotion. “You’re safe. You’re home with me. You’re safe now.”

Slowly, the panic ebbed. The fear gripping him loosened its hold, and the haze obscuring his vision lifted. He found himself standing in front of Maude.

She gripped his upper arms, shaking him, a look of concern plastered on her face. Ever so slowly, the memories drifted back, and he calmed.

“Are you all right?” Maude asked.

He shook his head, as if still trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind. Edgar cleared his throat and looked into her eyes, desperate to banish his fears and feel safe again.

“I… I need some air. I need to get out of here for a bit,” he stammered.

With that, Edgar stormed out of the house, closing the door behind him harder than he’d intended. But then he was outside, taking several deep, cleansing breaths of the cool, fresh night air.

He blew them out slowly, and the panic that had held dominion over him began to lift like the morning fog.

Edgar walked around and stood behind the barn, not wanting to be seen by anybody. His heart swelled inside of him and he felt choked by a thousand competing emotions… none of them good.

Shame, and grief, and anger all churned inside of him, crushing him beneath their enormous weight. Edgar doubled over and put his hands on his knees, sucking in deep breaths, trying to quell the

tremors in his body.

And he sobbed silently.

22

Maude stood in the middle of the great room, watching him walk away. When the door banged shut behind him, she flinched, as if she'd been physically struck.

Tears sprang to her eyes and she put her hand over her mouth to stifle the sound of her crying.

The look on Edgar's face was burned into her mind—fear blended with anger and sorrow. It was a complex mix of emotions, and Maude couldn't help but feel like it had been her fault.

She'd done something to set him off, pushing him even further away.

Whatever it was, she wanted to make it right. She didn't want to start this new chapter in their lives on a note like that.

Maude wanted their first night in their new home to be special. To be happy. But it seemed like the only thing it was going to be was a mess.

And Maude felt responsible for it all.

The front door opened and she looked up, hoping that Edgar was coming back in to talk. But she let out a small sigh, seeing that it was Anna.

The older woman stepped in and closed the door behind her. “Is everything all right?” she asked cautiously.

“No. Not really,” Maude admitted. “I did something to upset Edgar and he stormed out of here.”

“I saw him stomping across the yard,” Anna confessed, a rueful smile on her lips.

“Don’t beat yourself up like this, dear. Edgar isn’t in a very good place these days, as I’m sure you know.”

“I’d hoped that a change of scenery, getting his ranch started, and, of course, us being married would change his outlook on things.

“I’d hoped it would help pull him into a better place,” Maude replied.

Anna chuckled gently. “I’m afraid it’s not going to be that simple.”

“So I’m gathering,” Maude said, feeling defeated.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. There is a lot going on with Edgar right now that has nothing to do with you. There are a lot of things he’s going to have to find a way to move past.”

“It’s difficult to not be hard on myself when I feel like it’s all my fault.”

Anna shook her head. “It’s definitely not your fault, Maude. That’s

something you need to get out of your own head right now.

“It’s important for you to accept that Edgar’s moods are not because of anything you’ve done. That’s a key to survival here.

“It took me a while to figure that out, but when I did, it made everything else much easier to handle.”

Maude stared down at the floor for a moment, frowning. “I should go talk to him.”

“Not yet. Just give him some time to cool off first.”

Anna took her by the hand and Maude let herself be guided over to the rocking chairs. Her mother-in-law sat her down, then took the chair next to her, never letting go of her hand.

Anna gave it a firm squeeze, making Maude look up at her. “Tell me what happened,” she prompted.

Maude hesitated, uncertain that spilling their marital troubles to her mother-in-law was the wisest thing to do. But that was why Anna was there in the first place, to act as a sort of neutral buffer for the both of them.

Anna had months of experience that Maude didn’t have, and she knew how to manage Edgar better than Maude obviously could.

And so she unloaded everything, from the moment Edgar’s mood began to spiral downward to the moment he’d stormed out of the house. She left nothing out and didn’t try to paint herself as a victim.

She told Anna frankly that the lack of intimacy between them was

troubling her—more than she'd thought it would. And the more she thought about it, the more terrible it made her feel, and the angrier she got.

So, after what had happened when he'd cared for her wound, and him pulling away from her despite Maude sending all the right signals, she'd been hurt and upset.

She admitted to Anna that she had thrown a tantrum. She had been slamming the pots and pans around in the kitchen, not knowing how else to vent her anger.

It was, she assumed, what had upset Edgar and led him to storm out of the house and away from her.

And as Maude relayed her tale of woe, Anna merely listened with a patient expression on her face. She didn't interrupt, nor did she make Maude feel as if she was being judged for her actions.

While telling Anna everything didn't necessarily make her feel better right away, it lifted a heavy weight from Maude's shoulders. She was no longer bearing this burden alone.

"It just feels like there's a valley a thousand miles wide between us," Maude said. "I don't know how else to describe it. Nor do I know how to bridge that gap."

Anna squeezed her hand. "The first thing you're going to have to understand is that Edgar is not the same man you knew, Maude. The war changed him and he's having difficulty with intimacy.

"I imagine he's still dealing with the things that were done to him in that terrible camp he was a prisoner in," she said. "As a result, he doesn't let people close to him and shies away from any sort of

physical contact.

“The hug he shared with his father the day we left Mayfield was the first time I’d seen him let anybody touch him since he came home.”

Anna’s words provided her with some sense of solace, though they couldn’t take the sting out of feeling like she’d been rejected entirely. At least Maude the lack of intimacy with her husband wasn’t entirely because of her, or anything she’d done.

She hoped he’d been truthful when he’d said he did find her attractive and he did desire her. She’d felt like those words had been true earlier, when they were looking into each other’s eyes—but then he’d turned cold on her again.

“I suppose I have to ask—if he’s decided to shun intimacy, why did he want to marry me to begin with?” she asked.

Anna gave her a gentle smile. “Because he loves you, Maude. Has since he was a boy,” she said.

“I remember him being very young, maybe twelve or thirteen, telling me that he was going to marry you one day. He’s always loved you, and only you. Surely you know that.”

She frowned, but nodded. “I do. But it is difficult to believe when he barely looks my way, and won’t even touch me.”

“Give it time. And, above all, patience. What Edgar is dealing with isn’t easy for him… or for you, I know,” Anna said.

“But he has a lot to overcome if we’re ever going to get the man we knew back. And I know that having you by his side will make it

easier for him to do that."

Maude understood what she was saying, and knew it to be true. While knowing something was much different than being able to accept something and be all right with it, she loved Edgar and was willing to do her best.

"I can't promise I'm going to be perfect, but I will try to be patient and understanding," Maude said. "I want him to find his way back to us, Anna."

"As do I. And I think, together, we can help him find his way," she replied. "But we're going to have to work with him and be patient."

Maude sat still for a long moment, listening to the crackling and popping in the hearth as she turned everything Anna said in her mind.

She couldn't lie to herself and say this wasn't difficult, and that helping pull Edgar back into the light would be easy. But he meant enough to her that she would try.

She would fight like hell to help Edgar find the man he used to be under all the layers of scar tissue built up around him.

Maude lifted her head and gazed at Anna. "You said that was the first thing I needed to understand," she pointed out. "What's the second thing?"

Anna smiled softly. "It's that Edgar can't handle loud, sharp noises. I suspect it was you slamming the pots and pans in the kitchen that made him bolt from the house.

“He’s jumpier and more on edge these days. It’s almost as if a loud noise like that throws him right back to the war or something,” she said.

“I don’t understand it entirely, I just know that when he hears a noise like that, he has a reaction to it.”

Maude wanted to slap herself upside the head for not realizing it. Anna’s words made her think back to the train station and Edgar’s intense, visceral reaction to the sharp bang that came from the train.

He’d said that he had grown dizzy and lost his footing, but Maude had known, even then, that he wasn’t being truthful.

Remembering that now made her feel like a monster for throwing her tantrum with the pots and pans in the kitchen, and making that kind of a racket.

“Of course,” Maude said softly. “How could I not have considered that? It’s called Soldier’s Heart.”

“Soldier’s Heart?”

She nodded. “It’s said that men who return from war are often afflicted with what’s called Soldier’s Heart. Sharp, loud noises, even fireworks can trigger a reaction.

“It’s said that they flash back to war, like you said. I read about it a while ago and had forgotten about it until now.”

Anna nodded, as if she understood. “That makes sense,” she said. “And I believe if we can put a name to it, we can find a way to beat it.”

“Perhaps,” Maude replied. “I’ll need to send away for books. Maybe there is something in the writings of some psychologists we can find to help us.”

“That’s a wonderful idea.”

They both fell silent for a long moment, each absorbed in her thoughts and her concern for Edgar. Maude finally decided it was time to talk to her husband, so she got to her feet.

“Thank you, Anna. Your counsel is more appreciated than I can even begin to express,” she said. “I am grateful to you for being here with us.”

She gave Maude a small smile. “Me being here and trying to help with Edgar is as much for my own sake as for yours.”

Maude smiled. “Well, it’s a good thing we have each other.”

She turned and left the house, softly closing the door behind her. Standing at the top of the stairs that led down from the porch, she looked out into the darkness beyond.

A wolf howled somewhere in the darkness that enveloped the world around her and sent a shudder through her. It was such a lonesome, plaintive sound, it pained her to hear it.

She descended the stairs and walked across the yard, the gravel and hard dirt crunching beneath her boots as she went. Maude wasn’t certain where Edgar had disappeared to, but took a chance and went into the barn.

He wasn’t in there, but as she walked along the rows of stalls, the horses who’d pulled their wagons whickered softly in the darkness,

startling her. Over their noises, she heard what sounded like somebody crying softly.

The sound was even sadder than the wolf's howl, and knowing it was Edgar wrenched her heart painfully.

She stood stock-still for a moment, unsure whether she should go to him. It was obviously a private moment and she didn't think that he would necessarily appreciate her intruding.

But she wanted him to know that she was there for him, no matter what. She wanted him to know that he could cry with her and that she would not think any less of him.

His tears wouldn't scare her off or make her think him any less of a man.

She slipped through the back door and found him leaning against the back wall of the barn, staring out into the vast expanse of darkness before them. The moonlight glinted off the tracks his tears had left upon his face, sparkling like rivulets of ice.

He didn't turn when she came out, nor did he acknowledge her presence in any way. He simply stood there, staring into the distance.

Her stomach turning over on itself, Maude cleared her throat and did her best to stand up straight.

He looked so forlorn that she wanted to throw her arms around Edgar and hold him, but she recalled what Anna had said about his aversion to physical contact and restrained herself.

"Edgar, I want you to know that you're safe with me. You can talk

to me about anything. You can cry with me and tell me everything going through your mind.

“I want to understand what you’ve endured,” she told him. “I want to understand you and get back to where we used to be.”

Edgar didn’t move a muscle. It was as if he’d become a statue. Maude felt a stitch of pain in her heart, but she pressed on.

“Do you remember that day down by the Double B? The day you gave me this necklace?” she asked, and when he didn’t respond, she continued.

“That was the day I knew I was in love with you. And it was the day I knew you were in love with me. We shared everything and held nothing back from each other.

“Our love was open and it was honest. And I want us to get back to that point. I’m patient and I’ll do whatever it takes to get there. I just need to know you want that, too.”

Edgar remained as still as if he’d been frozen in time, and that stitch of pain in Maude’s heart grew ever sharper.

She fought back the tears that welled in her eyes, knowing they wouldn’t help in that moment. But his stony silence didn’t make it easy for her.

“Anyway, I guess I just want you to know that I’m here for you. Always. And I want you to be able to share your thoughts and feelings with me,” she added.

Edgar still didn’t respond and just stared into the distance, his thoughts and feelings completely opaque to her. Feeling utterly

defeated, Maude hung her head and turned away slowly, giving him ample time to stop her before she left.

He didn’t say a word, and Maude walked back to the house, feeling alone. The first cracks in her heart were forming.

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The darkness in the room was nearly perfect. Only the bright light of the moon that pressed in at the edges of the curtains spoiled it, muddling the pitch blackness.

Most of the room was cloaked in inky shadows, while some of it was merely a mottled gray. It didn't matter to Maude, though.

She simply stared at the ceiling, seeing nothing at all.

She was alone in bed, the covers pulled up to her chin, the way she used to do when she was a child and was scared of something. Though she couldn't say she was particularly scared at the moment, her emotions were certainly in chaos.

Edgar's silence behind the barn had hit her with the force of a horse kick to the midsection. She'd come back in and ate a very quiet dinner with Anna, then retired for the evening to cry until she had no tears left.

Unable to find sleep, she lay there, staring at the ceiling, trying to sort the jumble of thoughts and emotions that were ravaging her.

She needed to be patient for Edgar, to have a gentle hand in

helping guide him back to the world of the living since it seemed he preferred existing among the shades.

She knew there was a piece of him, though, that longed to join her, that yearned to be with her and to live a happy life. She'd seen it in his eyes.

But he remained in a self-imposed purgatory, and apparently didn't know how to get out.

To Maude, it came down to a matter of desire and choices. Maybe part of him wanted to take her hand and let her guide him out of the depths, but that piece of him wasn't strong enough to do it.

His desire to rejoin the world didn't outweigh his inclination to remain where he was, caught between two worlds but an actual part of neither.

It hurt her heart to know that his love for her wasn't strong enough to break the bonds of his self-imposed emotional prison. She had no doubt that he loved her.

But his need to punish himself for whatever happened in the past held more sway over him, and Maude didn't have the first clue how to break through that wall.

It would be easy for her to bemoan her fate, to sulk and pout about how unfair it all was, how unfair he was being to her. But she also knew it was unfair of her to hold those thoughts.

She had married him knowing he wasn't the same man she had once known. She had married him knowing he was broken.

And she knew it was the pinnacle of vanity to think that she alone

could put all of his shattered pieces back together again. Or that her love was the only salve he needed for his wounds.

She knew all that, but it didn't stop Maude from wallowing in her own self-pity for a while.

In her mind, she heard the echo of Mrs. Stewart's voice, telling her that wallowing was just fine for a day or two, but any more, and you were being a self-indulgent princess.

Mrs. Stewart was a firm believer in picking yourself up, dusting yourself off, and carrying on.

She was a strong woman and one whom Maude admired immensely. She had often thought she would like to grow into the sort of woman Mrs. Stewart was, but, secretly, she feared she could never be half that strong or wise.

Maude supposed that with Edgar, she was getting her first test to see if that was true or not, since her marriage was going to be difficult. At least in the beginning.

She still held out hope that once they'd cleared these hurdles and got Edgar back on solid footing again, things would turn out all right in the end.

Eventually, they would have the sort of love the poets and bards of old wrote and sang about. The sort of love that could sustain and fulfill you, love that made you genuinely happy, down in your bones.

It was what Maude longed for with every fiber of her being, and she thought she could have that with Edgar. She still believed it, despite the many challenges and uphill battles they already faced.

She shifted in the bed, frowning to herself. She'd heard Edgar come in from outside a little while ago, but he hadn't come to bed.

Perhaps it was his issues with intimacy keeping him from their bed. Perhaps it was his fear she would demand he perform his husbandly duty, and he didn't want to reject her outright.

Though not coming to bed was, in all practical effect, the same thing.

Throwing back the covers, Maude grabbed her robe and quickly pulled it on over her shift. The fire in the hearth in their room had burned low and wasn't casting off any heat, leaving the room ice cold.

She threw another couple of logs into the fire, hoping they would ignite. They caught after a couple of moments and Maude knew the room would be warm again in no time.

That done, she opened the door and went out into the main part of the house. The fire roared and the room was pleasantly warm.

She found Edgar at the table near the windows, hunched over a plate of food. He didn't look up when she walked in, his stony silence continuing.

She sighed and pulled out a chair, sitting down across from him. Edgar took a bite of the chicken his mother had made earlier and washed it down with a long swallow from his cup of water.

For a little while, she watched him in silence. The flickering light from the hearth sent shadows dancing across his face.

To Maude, it was an image that encapsulated the two sides of

Edgar perfectly, the light and the dark. That summed up who he was to her at the moment: two different people, depending on which way the light broke.

“Are you all right?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

Edgar nodded and took another bite of chicken, but said nothing more. She watched as he tore a biscuit apart, buttered it generously, and then bit into it.

He never once looked up at her, and aside from his nod in answer to her question, she might have thought he didn’t even know she was in the room.

“We’re going to have to talk eventually, Edgar,” she said. “You can’t keep avoiding me forever.”

He paused with the chicken leg halfway to his mouth, his expression saying she shouldn’t be so sure about that. But then he took another bite—so his mouth was occupied, she assumed, and he wouldn’t have to say anything at all.

Maude was growing frustrated and did her best to tamp it down. She needed to remain calm and unemotional.

Anna had said it was the only way to get through to him, since he tended to shut down when emotions began to run high.

“I meant what I said outside, Edgar. You can always talk to me. About anything and everything,” she said. “We’re in this together, and I need you to know that.”

“I do.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Do you? Because that’s not the feeling I’ve been getting since I stepped off the train in Mayfield.

“In fact, I’ve got to be honest and tell you that I’ve been feeling pretty much alone in this,” she confessed.

Maude silently cursed herself for her outburst. She hadn’t intended to give voice to any of that, but it hit the tip of her tongue after his comment and just came boiling out before she’d had a chance to check herself.

It did provoke a reaction from him, though. But rather than shut down, like Maude thought he might, Edgar’s expression merely darkened.

His face grew tight and his eyes narrowed. She knew she’d hit a nerve and he was doing his best to control his temper.

She was glad to see that he did have some emotion left inside of him, after all. And even if he yelled, it was better than going still and silent as a statue on her.

Maude knew Anna would disagree, but sometimes, even yelling and screaming was better than nothing. If you were yelling, you could still find a way to communicate.

And with communication often came understanding.

It wasn’t pretty and not her ideal way of resolving their issues, but Maude would take him blowing up over him saying nothing at all.

“You can’t possibly understand,” he said.

“I can’t if you don’t tell me. But maybe, just maybe, if you open up

and talk to me, I could."

"You weren't there, Maude. There is no possible way you can ever understand what I went through.

"The things I saw," he said, and then, in a lower voice, added, "the things I did."

She sat back in her seat and looked at Edgar, her heart breaking for him. Sitting there, with his eyes downcast and his shoulders slumped, he looked absolutely lost.

He looked like a man with no sense of himself, with no connection to the world around him… or the people in it. He looked like a man who truly did belong in a world filled with nothing more than shades.

But Maude knew there was still life and vibrancy inside of him, joy trapped in some dark cellar deep within him, locked away from the world. Locked away from even himself.

Edgar was a man who'd endured such terrible things, he had forgotten how to smile. How to laugh. How to love.

And though she knew it would be no easy feat, Maude once again vowed to herself to teach him how to do all of that, and more, once again.

It would be the task of a lifetime, one that would tax her like nothing else she'd ever gone through. It would make her time at Aunt Tilda's look like a garden cotillion.

She knew that the guilt, or shame, or whatever it was that held sway over Edgar wouldn't loosen its hold on him easily.

But she hoped, more than anything, that once Edgar emerged from his own Purgatory and decided he'd had enough of being a shade, there would be a future filled with nothing but the purest love she'd ever known.

And Maude knew that she could not falter, and she could not fail. It wasn't only Edgar depending on her—Anna was depending on Maude to help save her son.

More than that, Maude was depending on herself to rescue the man she loved.

"You're right. I wasn't there and there is no possible way I can truly understand what you went through, Edgar," she told him.

"But if you talk to me, open up to me, maybe I can help you carry that burden."

"It's not yours to carry."

"I'm your wife, Edgar. It's my duty and my responsibility to help you carry whatever burdens are upon your shoulders."

He shook his head and pushed his plate away from him. "That's not how it works, Maude."

"That's exactly how it works. That's what marriage is, Edgar: two people coming together to share their joys, their pains, and their sorrows," she replied.

"It's about sharing with each other—the good and the bad. Don't you recall that we both said a little something like that in our vows?"

He sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands, the frustration evident in his expression. He set his hands down flat on the table, as if to control the anger flowing through him that seemed to be building to an explosive crescendo.

Maude took a deep, steadying breath and gritted her teeth, steeling herself for the onslaught of his fury. She watched the color drain from his face.

“This is my burden, Maude. This is mine to carry, and mine alone,” he said.

“It doesn’t have to be, Edgar. I am your wife. You need to learn to open up and share with me.”

He slammed his fist down on the table so violently it nearly upended his cup. Maude shrank back in her seat, her eyes wide and a white-hot bolt of fear shooting through her.

Edgar sat back and unclenched his fists, clearly doing his best to rein in his temper, though she could see he still trembled with it.

“This is my burden, Maude. You couldn’t possibly understand the scope of what I lost during the war. You couldn’t possibly understand the pain I suffered.”

Her eyes widened as she looked at him and her fear was swiftly replaced by a deep, abiding anger. She narrowed her eyes and stared at him, rage crackling along her skin.

“I don’t understand loss? I don’t understand pain?” she seethed.

Edgar didn’t reply. He simply stood there, staring back at her, seemingly unable to comprehend why she was so angry, which

only infuriated her even more.

So, she enlightened him.

“I seem to recall you and I sitting in those very chairs before the hearth after my parents died and my entire world came crashing down,” she hissed.

“So how dare you say I don’t understand pain and loss. How dare you, Edgar.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again, apparently not knowing what to say to her. He looked away, scratching his jaw, unable to meet her eyes.

“Maybe it’s not the same sort of pain and loss you suffered, but I know pain and loss very, *very* well, Edgar. And I resent you saying I don’t.”

Maude shot to her feet, tears stinging her eyes as she rushed to the bedroom. Slamming the door behind her, Maude threw herself down on the bed and sobbed, her entire body trembling with the effort.

As she cried, she reminded herself once more that she knew there would be times that tried her spirit, times she would cry her eyes out just like this.

She just hadn’t expected that they’d be so soon.

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Edgar paced the front room, feeling frustrated. He tossed another log onto the fire and sat down in the chair before the hearth.

Unsettled, he stood up and started to pace the room again. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Maude.

He was all twisted up in his mind and sometimes didn't know fantasy from reality. But the one thing he knew for a concrete fact, above all else, was that he loved her.

He'd always loved her. And he had never, ever wanted to be the cause of her pain.

From the back room, he could hear her sniffling through the door. It sounded like she was trying to stifle her sobs to keep him from hearing them.

It was breaking his heart. He hated that her crying was because of him, that he was the cause of her pain and upset.

Edgar walked outside and stood at the top of the stairs on the porch. He took several long, deep breaths of the cool, clean night

air.

Turning his face up to the sky, he looked at the stars overhead. They glittered coldly in the darkness above, like chips of diamonds spread across the velvety black of the heavens.

They were beautiful. Standing beneath the stars always gave him some peace as well as perspective.

Edgar was trying to find ways to cope with everything he'd gone through, to settle his soul and bring peace to his life.

One technique was to find something bigger than himself. Something to humble him and show him that his problems weren't that big in the grand scope of things.

To that end, Edgar liked to stand outside, under the stars, and contemplate the vastness of the universe. Seeing how large, how endless the heavens were made Edgar realize just how small he was by comparison.

And his problems were even smaller than that.

But, oh, how they felt even more enormous than the entire universe some days. The weight of everything he'd endured, the nightmares that plagued his sleep and the flashbacks when he was awake, were often more than he could bear.

He was always on edge, always looking over his shoulder, always on heightened alert. Edgar hadn't known a single moment's rest in a very long time.

Captain Landon featured most often in his nightmares, both sleeping and waking.

‘While Edgar still bore scars on his body from Landon’s ministrations, the degradation and humiliation he’d suffered at the man’s hand had left what felt like indelible marks on his soul.

And it wasn’t just Landon that haunted him. The men he’d been imprisoned with had turned into little more than wild animals, following their baser instincts.

The things Edgar had witnessed his fellow prisoners doing to one another and to themselves had left imprints on him every bit as deep and dark as what Landon had done to him.

Staring up into the sparkling darkness above, Edgar recognized that none of what he’d suffered was Maude’s fault. She had been nothing but kind to him. She had done nothing but try to help him.

And he needed for her to know that he appreciated it. He needed to stop being the cause of *her* pain.

Edgar looked over to the cottage his mother was staying in. Light shone around the edges of the curtains in the windows and smoke curled lazily out of the chimney.

He thought about going over to speak with her about all of this, but he hesitated. He’d had trouble confiding in his mother since he returned from the war.

Not that it had been easy even before he left, but it seemed confiding in anybody was now a Herculean feat for him. Edgar decided this was not the time to try to bridge that gap.

Instead, he took a deep breath and exhaled. Then, he took a couple more, just to settle himself down.

Edgar wanted to be calm and in control of not just his faculties, but his emotions as well. When he felt settled, Edgar turned and walked back into the house, closing the door softly behind him.

He paused just inside the threshold and held his breath, listening for a moment. Edgar couldn't hear her crying and all was silent.

He didn't think she was asleep, though. He hadn't been outside long enough, and as upset as she was, Edgar didn't think that Maude would be able to sleep very easily.

He steeled himself as he walked down the hallway. He paused just outside the door to their bedroom with his hand in the air, ready to knock.

Then he lowered his hand and simply went inside. It was his bedroom, too, after all.

The oil lamp on the side table burned low, leaving much of the room cloaked in shadows. She was sitting on the bed with her back against the headboard, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs.

She looked at him, but said nothing. Edgar could see the tears on her face glittering in the soft light of the lamp. Maude wiped them away and sniffed loudly.

Edgar sat down on the edge of the bed, his hands in his lap and his back to her. They remained in silence like that for several long minutes.

Now that he was sitting there, Edgar had no idea what to say.

Tension and a sense of expectation crackled in the air between

them, and Edgar wrung his hands together, trying to put the chaos in his head into some sense of order.

He dared not look at her, for fear of being overwhelmed and unable to form a coherent word. So, keeping his eyes on his hands, he started to speak.

“I’m sorry, Maude. For the way I spoke to you,” he finally said. “You didn’t deserve that.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, her voice ice cold.

His heart hammered inside of him. All he wanted to do was retreat into a safe, dark place.

He realized that although he’d left the cellar where he’d been kept by Captain Landon, he was still every bit the prisoner now as he was back then.

Only his captor wasn’t a Confederate captain. It was himself.

“During the war—after I’d been captured—I experienced things no man should ever have to face,” he said quietly. “That no human being should ever have to endure.”

He closed his eyes. “There are some days I wish Captain Landon would have just killed me, instead.”

There was a shifting on the bed and suddenly Maude was there beside him. She took his hands in hers and though it was a struggle, Edgar forced himself to look up, to meet her gaze.

What he saw in her face was a mixture of compassion and steely-eyed determination. She laid one hand softly against his cheek and

he leaned into it, relishing the warmth of her skin.

“Don’t say that ever again, Edgar. Please,” she implored him. “I would be lost without you. My world would be so much worse without you in it.”

“I fear I’m only makin’ your world worse, anyway. I’m not the same man you knew before you left for Boston. Before I went away to war.

“And I’m sorry for that, Maude. I’m sorry I can’t be that man anymore. You deserve so much better.”

She shook her head, a sad and yet strangely hopeful expression on her face. She turned her head and placed a gentle kiss on the palm of his hand that made Edgar shudder with delight.

“I knew coming in there would be some rough days ahead. Knew there would be trying times,” she said, quietly but earnestly.

“And I married you anyway. Now, do you know why I did that?”

It was his turn to shake his head. “I really don’t.”

“It’s because I know that man is still there inside of you. I know he’s there; I’ve seen him,” she insisted. “And I married you because I love you, Edgar. I always have.”

“I don’t know if I can ever be him again.”

Maude gripped his hand a bit tighter. “I know you can.

“And… I’ll try not to push so hard or get so upset, but I need you to meet me halfway, Edgar,” she said softly. “I need you to talk to

me and open up."

"I'm not sure I can tell you anything more about that time, Maude. About what happened."

"I need you to try," she pressed. "The only way to get past something is to go straight through it. And I'm going to be here to help you every step of the way.

"We'll get through this, Edgar. Together."

He paused for a moment, letting her words wash over him. He had been alone for so long, forced to deal with everything he endured by himself, that he didn't know how to accept help, even if he wanted to.

But the thought of Maude being there with him, helping him… it stirred the dim sparks of hope that still burned inside of him.

Those sparks were faint, but they were still there, buried under years of muck and grime. If there was anybody who could breathe new life into them, it would be Maude.

She had always been the one who helped him through whatever he'd faced in life. Maybe she could help guide him through this, too.

He turned to her, a wan smile upon his lips. "Together."

25

While Edgar cut furrows into the soft, rich soil, laying the groundwork for their crops, Maude followed behind, digging the holes for the seeds.

The work was tiresome and tedious, but they needed to lay their crops so they'd have food when the weather turned bad.

Aside from their food, the crops they were planting were going to bring in some money that would allow Edgar to start purchasing livestock—and from there, the horses he intended to breed for sale.

Maude was used to it, though, and didn't mind some hard work. It kept her mind off other things. Besides, this was their home.

It would be the place where they raised their children. If they ever had children.

Maude silently scolded herself for such a cruel thought, but it was difficult to banish all of her anger and bitterness entirely when her husband still had not shared a bed with her.

It had been a few weeks since Edgar had promised to try to talk to her about things. And though they'd not had another argument, he

still hadn't opened up very much.

Instead, when he was getting upset or feeling cornered, he would simply excuse himself and go outside to blow off a little steam. He would often just stand out there, silently looking at the sky for a long time. Sometimes hours.

Maude knew she had to respect that he didn't want to lash out at her. He was finding ways to channel his anger and pain rather than taking it out on her.

Far too many men turned to a bottle or to beating on their woman to vent their frustrations and anger, she knew. Edgar would never do that. He was too good a man.

Still, it didn't make the lack of intimacy any easier. It wasn't just a lack of physicality between them, though the fact that he'd not yet lain with her was a particular sore spot for her.

Maude also wanted him to open up and trust her with his pain. His inability to share his trials with her and let her help him heal felt like rejection.

To Maude, trusting your partner and sharing yourself with them, your happiness or your grief, was the most intimate part of a marriage.

But Edgar, for whatever reason, was unable to do that. And that lack of trust, that lack of intimacy, was creating a gap between them.

It allowed her own frustrations and resentments to fester. And she hoped, for both of their sakes, he was able to find a way to trust her before that festering wound turned to poison in their marriage.

Every woman had her breaking point. There would come a time when she had to decide whether or not something could be healed.

Or if she would be resigned to a life that was cold, closed off, and devoid of any intimacy or trust.

Although she found the idea of a divorce abhorrent, Maude also knew she wouldn't live like that. She was still young and the desire to love and be loved burned brighter than the sun inside of her.

She had much to give, so much she wanted in life. And if there was one thing her experience in Boston had taught her, it was that she had one chance at life—if she did not seize it, life would pass her by.

"Dammit!"

Maude whipped her head around and felt her heart sink into her stomach when she saw Edgar cradling his upper arm, blood spilling from the gash.

She jumped to her feet and started across the field toward him. When she reached him, she saw the jagged end of the tool he'd been using lying on the ground, then gasped at the wound on his arm.

The blood was pouring out of him, staining the sleeve of his shirt a bright crimson. Blood had never bothered her, but the grimace of pain etched upon his face did.

"Come with me," she ordered. "And keep pressure on that wound."

She guided Edgar through the field and as they approached the house, Anna stood up from her spot on the porch. She dropped her

knitting to the ground, a look of horror on her face.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Maude tried to reassure her. “But I’m going to need some water boiled, a needle, thread, iodine, and fresh bandages.”

Anna nodded and rushed off to get the things Maude had listed. Maude helped Edgar up the steps to the porch, and then ushered him inside.

She sat him down in one of the rockers before the hearth. He looked up at her and grinned.

“You’re very good in a crisis,” he said.

“I have some experience from my time in Boston. You’d be surprised how many scullery maids nearly chop their fingers off.”

Edgar chuckled softly, giving Maude a brief smile. And as their eyes met, for the briefest of moments, she saw the man she knew he could be. It heartened her.

“Okay, I need you to take your shirt off—”

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Edgar, I need to see how deep the wound is.”

“Can’t you do it the way it is?”

“No, I can’t,” she said, exasperated. “Just take your shirt off.”

“I don’t want to.”

Maude blew out a frustrated breath. Why was he being so obstinate about it? Was even that small action too intimate for her husband?

She pushed those thoughts away and focused on the task at hand. This was not the time for her to be delving into that particular briar patch. Edgar was wounded and needed her help.

“Edgar, I’m your wife. There’s no need for you to be modest with me,” she said.

“I need to see to your wound, and I can’t do it properly with your shirt on. I have to clean it properly, so you don’t develop an infection.”

Edgar sighed and though he looked grieved, she could see that he understood the sense of her words. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt, his expression revealing his absolute discomfort.

When he finally slipped his shirt off, he looked down at the ground, unable to meet her eyes. His expression darkened and the look in his eyes was both haunted and tormented—as if he was ashamed of himself.

And as Maude looked at him without his shirt for the first time, she had to stifle her gasp and keep the tears welling in her eyes from falling.

Neither would help, she knew. But understanding finally dawned on her as she looked at the criss-crossing network of scars that lined his body.

Some were long, clean slices and others were jagged, lumpy messes of raised white scar tissue. He was covered in them.

She bit back her own horror and grief at seeing what was done to him. In that moment, she understood why he was the way he was.

She couldn't even imagine the suffering he'd endured, but she knew that it was great enough to break even the strongest of men. It broke her heart for him, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

The front door opened and when Anna came rushing in with a tray, she nearly dropped it and gasped in horror.

Edgar flinched hard, as if she'd physically struck him, and he seemed to draw further into himself.

"Thank you, Anna. I'll see to him myself," Maude said, her tone firm.

She gave her mother-in-law a look that told her to get out and get a hold of herself. As if understanding, Anna nodded and quickly departed after setting the tray down on the small table beside Maude.

After the door closed, she heard Anna muffle what sounded like a cry of grief. Maude understood that feeling all too well, since she was currently biting back the myriad emotions whirling violently within her.

Edgar hung his head even lower, the shame on his face clear. Doing her best to act as if nothing was amiss, Maude picked up a cloth and dipped it into the water, then went about cleaning and examining the area around the wound.

She focused in on the wound and shut out everything else, losing herself in the work of getting him fixed up.

“Thankfully, it doesn’t look too bad,” she said, trying to sound chipper and upbeat. “The cut didn’t go very deep.”

Edgar said nothing. He simply sat there, eyes focused on the ground beneath him.

He looked so lost and in such spiritual agony that Maude wanted to cry. But she kept herself in check, reminding herself that this was not about her.

So, she thoroughly cleaned out the wound and gave it an iodine wash. After that, she wrapped it in clean bandages and gave Edgar a smile.

“All better,” she announced. “Though I’d say you probably want to give it a rest for a couple of days. Give it a chance to heal.”

“But the fields—”

“Will still be there in a couple of days,” she interrupted. “You don’t want to open up that wound and risk it getting infected.”

Maude disappeared into the back room for a moment, then came back out with a fresh shirt. Edgar looked up at her, his face scrolling through a million different emotions. But he stood up and took the shirt from her, quickly slipping into it.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. See me,” he said quietly. “I… I wish you hadn’t. I’m sure I look like a monster.”

She gave him a look that was pure compassion and empathy. Reaching out, Maude took his hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it, then looked up at him.

“You don’t look like a monster,” she assured him. “You look like the same beautiful boy I gave my heart to all those years ago.”

“But my scars—”

“Mean nothing to me,” she finished earnestly. “I love you, Edgar. And I hate that you obviously suffered greatly.

“But your scars don’t mean anything to me. It’s flesh. My heart still belongs to you. And it always will.”

His eyes were watery and rimmed with red. He looked like he was on the verge of crying himself, but quickly got himself under control.

“Thank you, Maude.”

“You’re welcome.”

A small smile touched his lips. “Nobody’s tended my wounds like that since Gregory O’Malley. He was my sergeant and he was with me when we were taken.

“He was a good man. Tough as old leather, but a good man,” he said. “He survived the camp with me.

“Talked a lot about homesteadin’ somewhere out here in the Wyoming Territory. I don’t know if he made it out here, but I do miss him.”

It was the first time since they’d reunited that he’d dared mention any details about his time in the war, or anybody he’d fought it with.

That he'd brought up this Sergeant O'Malley filled Maude with a sense of hope that maybe, just maybe, they were starting to turn a corner. It gave her hope that things truly would be all right, after all.

"I'd love to hear about him," she said.

His mouth opened into a wider smile. "Maybe I'll tell you about him, then. I have some fond recollections of him."

"I'd like that, Edgar. I'd like that a lot."

26

With Maude at his side, Edgar drove the buckboard into town for the first time since they'd arrived several months ago now.

The past few weeks with Maude, after he'd showed her his scars, had been the best they'd had since she returned from Boston.

Edgar had felt more like his old self than he had since he left for the war. They'd talked more openly, he'd shared some of his stories, and they'd laughed like they hadn't done in what seemed like forever.

In a lot of ways, Edgar was feeling like a new man. Or, rather, like the old man he used to be. And he had Maude to thank for that.

But as they trundled into town, he knew he would be put to the test. Being around Maude and his mother was one thing; he was comfortable with them.

Being around *people* again, people he didn't know, was something else entirely. He hadn't even felt comfortable around folks back in Mayfield, and he'd known most of them, to some extent.

Still, he was determined to do his best to keep moving forward, knowing he'd made some positive progress these last few weeks. If for no other reason than because it seemed to make Maude happy.

And for him, that was the most important thing. He loved seeing her smile and wanted to see more of it.

"Look at that," Edgar said, a note of awe in his voice. "The town's already growin'."

Wellington Flats was still a dirty frontier town, but in just the time since they'd moved there, new construction was already starting.

There were more permanent structures going up, replacing the canvas tents that had been numerous and common the last time they'd passed through.

"I told you it'd start to grow as new homesteaders came in," he said. "Just like Mayfield."

Maude laughed, and he could see the skepticism on her face. Coming from Boston, one of the more modern cities in the country, he figured everything was going to feel rustic, like a backwater hovel.

But Edgar didn't have those preconceived notions—what he saw was a town just beginning to thrive.

There was a less-than-modern feel about Wellington Flats but, nestled in the Yellowstone Valley, it was picturesque, the soil was fertile, and there was a lot of open land.

Edgar guessed that within five years, this town would be as big as Mayfield, perhaps even bigger.

While it would likely always retain its frontier atmosphere and never be a center of culture like Boston or New York, its charm would appeal to a great many people.

Edgar found a place to park the buckboard near the stable, then unhitched his team. The stablehand came over and Edgar gave the boy a couple of coins to water and brush down the horses while they did their shopping.

That done, Maude took his arm and they walked down the town's main thoroughfare, gazing into the windows of the shops that lined it. There weren't many, of course, but they stopped to look at the new construction going up.

"What do you suppose they're building?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Don't know yet. But they're building—that's the important thing," he said. "Makes me think this place is taking root.

"It's not goin' to dry, wither, and blow away like a lot of these towns out here on the frontier," he chuckled.

She smiled. "Well, it would be nice to have a thriving town near our home."

"Yes, it would."

They walked on and Edgar could feel the eyes on him. He looked around and caught some of the people staring at them.

They quickly looked away, going back about their business, and he tried to ignore it. But the prickling sensation on the back of his neck persisted.

He didn't like being stared at, but tried to tell himself people were just curious. They were strangers there and, he knew well, strangers drew the eyes of the locals.

They walked into the general store, which was large. It was tidy and well kept, which was more than could be said for some of the other places he'd seen along the avenue outside.

The proprietor was a large man with a round belly, a full head of white hair, ruddy cheeks, and a cheerful demeanor.

"New in town, eh?" he boomed, his voice deep and gruff.

Edgar nodded, fighting off the wave of nerves that washed over him. His anxiety was starting to rise like the tide.

Perhaps sensing that, Maude took his hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Yes," she said. "We've built a home not far from here—"

"Ahhh. You're the folks out by Rocky Pond," he said. "Beautiful land, that."

Maude nodded. "It truly is."

"Where y'all from?" he asked.

"Mayfield, originally," she replied. "I spent some time in Boston, though."

The shopkeeper chuckled, his jowls and belly jiggling. "Well, this town must feel like a step back in time, eh?"

Maude favored him with a warm smile. "While it's true that it's not as modern as Boston, I was born in Mayfield and quite love the

land. The natural beauty here is something to behold."

"Yep, you can't beat the valley for its beauty," he said.

Edgar was grateful to Maude for taking the lead and giving him a moment to get his legs under him. He took a deep breath, pushing his anxiety down to a more manageable level.

He squeezed Maude's hand and gave her a warm smile, letting her know that he was all right. She tipped him a wink and returned his smile.

In that moment, his love for her almost overwhelmed him.

"Sunderland," the shopkeeper rumbled as he extended his hand. "Richard Sunderland, but people around here just call me Jaws on account of me bein' the town dentist, too."

Maude laughed, then took his hand and gave it a shake. "Maude Kettering," she said. "This is my husband—"

"Edgar," he finally spoke up. "Edgar Kettering."

She gave him a smile, and the look of pride flushing her face as she looked at him filled him with a sense of pride in himself—something Edgar had been missing for a long time.

"Well, welcome to Wellington Flats, folks," Sunderland said. "Glad to have you here."

"Glad to be here," Edgar said, a confidence he hadn't known in years sweeping through him.

"Well, I'll let you boys do your business. I'll look around, if you

don’t mind,” Maude said.

“I’d be pleased if you did,” Sunderland said, then turned to Edgar. “Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Kettering?”

“Please, call me Edgar.”

“Edgar, then. And you can call me Jaws.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise.”

They talked for a little while as Jaws filled him in on the town. Edgar soaked it all up, enjoying learning about their new home and genuinely liking the shopkeeper. He was an affable man and very knowledgeable about a lot of different things.

Slowly, their conversation turned to business, and Edgar gave him a list of the supplies he had come in to order in the first place.

All the while, he kept a watch on Maude from the corner of his eye. She’d been looking at the collection of books, which was probably smaller than she was used to.

Then she stopped at a selection of fabrics and Edgar would have had to have been blind not to see the sparkle in her eye as she fingered a bolt of blue cloth. It was beautiful fabric and Maude was obviously taken with it.

“I can get all this for you in a couple of days,” Sunderland said, reading off the list. “Have it delivered out to your place when it all comes in.”

“That’d be fine,” Edgar replied, then added, “I might have one more thing I need to add to that list.”

Sunderland chuckled. “I thought you might.”

Edgar gave him a grin, then walked over to where Maude was standing, still touching the fabric.

It was a vibrant shade of blue and seemed to have an opalescent sheen to it. Edgar had never seen anything like it and could see why Maude seemed so taken with the material.

“It’s unusual,” he remarked.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured, then let go of it and turned to him. “It’s also ridiculously expensive.”

Edgar looked at the price tag and agreed with her. It was ridiculously expensive.

But seeing that dreamy, awestruck look in her eye had put a flutter in Edgar’s heart and he knew there was no price tag anyone could put on that.

He picked up the bolt of fabric and gave her a smile, then a quick peck on the forehead. She looked flustered for a moment, unable to speak.

It made him laugh as he turned and walked back toward the counter.

“Edgar, we can’t afford that fabric,” she whispered, hurrying after him.

They could afford it. Edgar had always been very careful about his money, socking away as much as he could from the time he worked in the factory through the war.

And they'd gotten the land they were living on for free. As a result, he had a sizeable nest egg.

While he knew he should probably save that money for a rainy day, his desire to see Maude happy and keep that smile on her face outweighed his frugality.

Sunderland looked at the fabric as if he didn't recognize it, then looked at the price tag—and even his eyes widened slightly. He looked up at Edgar questioningly.

"I'll take the whole bolt," Edgar said.

"The whole bolt?" Sunderland confirmed.

He nodded. "When Wellington Flats builds a theater, I'd love for my wife to have the most beautiful gown in town."

Sunderland smiled and nodded approvingly. "Tell you what, given the size of the order you've placed, I'll knock a few dollars off the price of the fabric."

"I'd be obliged," Edgar said. "Thank you."

Maude looked at him in near shock, her cheeks flushed with warmth and a smile curling her full lips upward. Edgar turned back to Sunderland.

"So, a couple of days?" he asked.

The big shopkeeper nodded. “Yes sir. I’ll drive it out to your place as soon as it comes in and we can settle up then.”

“Sounds good,” Edgar said.

Sunderland wrapped up the fabric in some plain brown paper and tied it tight, handling it like it was fragile. When he was finished, he handed the parcel to Edgar.

“Thank you, Jaws,” Edgar said. “It’s been good talkin’ to you.”

“You, too. It’s good to have you both here in town.”

“We’ll be seein’ you.”

Edgar and Maude walked out of the store, the parcel tucked under his arm. Maude squealed and threw her arms around him, planting a kiss on his cheek.

“I can’t believe you bought that fabric for me,” she said. “Thank you, Edgar.”

He looked down at her, holding her gaze. “There’s nothin’ I wouldn’t do for you, Maude. Nothin’ I wouldn’t get for you if I can. I only want to make you happy.”

She reached up and laid a hand against his cheek.

“You know what makes me happy?” she asked as a sly grin tugged at her lips. “I mean, aside from the fabric, of course?”

He chuckled softly. “Tell me.”

“You do. I mean, you’ve come so far in such a short time,” she said.

“You’re out and about, talking to people again… it’s like a whole new you.”

“You mean, the old me.”

“Right,” she said and laughed.

The sound of horses galloping down the avenue drew his attention and he gently moved Maude to the side of the road to keep her from harm, glancing up at the riders.

They were rough, hard-looking men. The kind of men you went out of your way to avoid, unless you were looking to catch a bullet or two in the back.

As the half-dozen horsemen passed them by and he glimpsed the man leading the group, Edgar felt his heart stop dead in his chest. His mouth grew dry and his legs very nearly gave out under him.

The tremble that ran through him was strong and he couldn’t stop the low, choked groan that passed his lips as a thousand old ghosts rose from the grave, seeking to pull him back down into their depths.

“Edgar? What is it?” Maude asked, alarmed.

She came around him and stared into his eyes, her face pinched with worry. She cupped his face in her hands and forced him to look at her.

“What’s wrong, Edgar? Talk to me,” she said. “Please.”

“It’s him,” he gasped. “Oh, God, it’s him. God help me, it’s Captain Landon.”

27

Maude had barely had time to process his words when Edgar abruptly took her by the hand and hurried her back toward the stables.

He very nearly dropped the bolt of cloth, seeming to have forgotten he was even holding it. If she hadn't acted quickly, she might have lost it.

Maude tried pulling her hand away, but his grip on hers was like an iron fist.

"Edgar, talk to me. Who was that? How do you know him?" she beseeched him.

"Boy, my horses. Now. Quickly," he barked at the stableboy.

As they stood there, waiting for the boy to hitch up the horses to their wagon, Edgar kept looking over his shoulder. He tapped his foot impatiently, his entire body tight.

The expression on his face was one of the starkest terror Maude had ever seen. He'd gone completely pale and he was shivering wildly.

“Edgar, talk to me. What’s wrong?” she asked.

He didn’t answer, and when the wagon was finally hitched, he practically threw her up onto the bench. He jumped up beside her and snatched up the reins, snapping them harder than necessary to get the horses moving.

He was silent the entire way back, the terror on his face never abating.

As they crested the rise that led to the shallow depression in the valley where their home stood, he seemed to relax. Slightly.

Edgar regained some of his color, but his body was still taut and he continued to look back over his shoulder, though less frequently. Maude turned back and saw nothing but the open road behind them.

She turned to him, a thousand questions firing through her mind all at once. “Edgar, please, will you talk to me?” she pleaded.

“It… there was that gang. I wanted to get you out of there. To safety,” he stammered. “Needed to get you away from town. Away from those men.”

“You said it was him,” she pressed. “Who’s him? Who did you recognize?”

Edgar said nothing more and as they approached their home, Maude sighed and looked straight ahead. He’d pulled back into himself, into that sullen, angry silence she knew so well.

The silence she’d hoped they were moving past.

The last few weeks had been wonderful and their marriage had never been better. But now, any trace of that man she knew was still inside of him seemed to have vanished. And Maude didn't understand why.

As they rumbled down the small road that led home, however, the pieces began to fall into place.

Edgar was strong. He was a brave and tough man, who was unafraid of most things. But she had seen the stark terror on his face, and she could think of only one thing that might incite that sort of a reaction in him.

It had to have been the man who'd caused him such deep and unbearable physical and emotional pain.

She couldn't be sure, of course, but if Maude was the gambling type, she would wager it had been the man who'd tortured him in that camp.

She turned to Edgar and wanted to ask him about it, but she knew it wasn't the right time. Deep down, though, Maude was sure she was right.

He pulled to a stop at the foot of the steps that led up to the porch and jumped down from the wagon. After he helped her down, Edgar thrust the parcel containing the fabric into her hands.

Running a hand through his hair, he cleared his throat. Though he was still tense and upset, he at least didn't look to be on the verge of falling apart like he had in town.

He seemed to be coming back to himself. Though he was still a long way from the man he'd been back in the general store.

“I’m… uhhhh… I’ll take care of the horses. You go on in,” he said. “I’ll be along in a bit.”

Without waiting for her to reply, Edgar jumped back onto the wagon and drove the horses toward the barn. Maude frowned as she watched him go, knowing she likely wouldn’t see him for the rest of the night.

With a heavy sigh, she turned and walked up the steps and into the house, slamming the door behind her as tears of frustration spilled down her cheeks.

“What is it, dear? What’s happened?”

Maude turned, startled by Anna’s presence. It was then she smelled the aroma of dinner cooking.

She practically threw herself into Anna’s arms and let the older woman hold and comfort her for a long moment. She sobbed into Anna’s blouse until she had no tears left.

Feeling awkward, Maude stepped back and wiped at her face. Anna handed her a cool rag and favored her with a gentle smile.

Maude took it gratefully and dabbed at the tracks of her tears from her cheeks. Anna stepped back into the kitchen and pulled the pans off the stove, setting them aside, then banked the fire inside.

When she was done, she took Maude’s hand and led her through the back door of the house.

Together, they walked down to the bank of Rocky Pond, as Maude now knew it was called, and stood in silence for a few moments.

The sun slipped toward the horizon, casting the mountains in dark silhouette. The sky was streaked with vivid hues of red and orange, and the clouds looked like giant balls of fire.

“I take it the trip into town didn’t go well?” Anna finally asked.

Maude grimaced as she thought about it. “It started off well. Better than well. Better than I could have hoped, really. It was like he was the old Edgar again,” she said.

“So, what happened?”

Maude told her about the men who’d ridden by them in the street and about Edgar’s reaction. She gave Anna every last detail she could recall.

Her mother-in-law just looked off toward those distant peaks as the world around them grew darker, listening to every word. And when Maude was done speaking, Anna turned to her, an inscrutable expression on her face.

“Are you all right, dear?”

Maude nodded. “I’m fine. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

Anna sighed. “Edgar is still very much in that prison,” she said. “And what’s worse is that he’s made you his prisoner, too.”

“I want to help.”

“I know you do. And I think Edgar wants your help,” Anna said softly.

“But in the end, he’s going to have to be the one who unlocks his

cell door and sets you both free. The answers are within him. He just needs to find them."

"And he's not yet in a place where he can truly search himself. Every time we make progress, something sets us back," Maude replied.

"It's almost as if he feels guilty, like he doesn't deserve to be happy or to move past the things that happened to him. So, he sabotages any progress he's made."

"And that very well may be the case."

"So, how do we show him he's got nothing to feel guilty about?" Maude asked.

Anna shook her head. "I don't think that's something we can do. I think that has to come from inside him."

Maude thought for a minute, then turned to Anna. "Who is Captain Landon?"

Anna shook her head. "I've heard the name, but Edgar has never told me who he is. If I had to guess, I'd say it's the man who tortured him in that Confederate war camp."

"If that's the case, how could he possibly be here?"

"I've heard stories about Confederate soldiers moving out west. Some of them just want a fresh start like us, and others are simply looking to continue the plundering and pillaging they did during the war," Anna said, a note of sadness in her voice.

"They seem to pop up in places that are prosperous, take control of

the town and drain it of everything of value. We had some of them come into Mayfield a while back. The townspeople fought back and killed them all."

Maude was shocked. "I hadn't heard that."

"It's not something people talk about in polite company," Anna said. "But I remember seeing the bodies of the men.

"They'd been hung in front of the courthouse and left there for a few days. It was savage and distasteful."

"But apparently warranted," Maude pointed out.

Anna frowned. "I suppose so. War makes monsters of us all."

Maude sighed and turned back, looking across the still water of the pond. The colors in the heavens above were reflected in its surface, making it look like it had been set ablaze.

She thought it fitting, given that she felt like her marriage, and her entire world, was burning down around her. And Maude had no idea how to put out the flames.

28

After the emotional day they'd had, Maude had gone to bed feeling exhausted and wrung out. But Edgar's cries and thrashing about pulled her out of a deep sleep.

She turned over and put her hand on his shoulder, shaking him. "Edgar, wake up. You're dreaming," she said. "Wake up."

If her voice had cut through his nightmares, he gave no sign of it. Tears spilled from his eyes and he cried out, though she couldn't understand his words.

Edgar held his hands out, as if trying to ward off a blow. The pain and terror on his face was real and Maude felt herself on the edge of panic, not knowing how to get through to him.

She feared that with the way he was thrashing about, he was going to hurt himself, and she knew she needed to do something.

Not knowing what else to do, Maude jumped on top of him and put her hands on his shoulders, feebly trying to hold him down to stop his wild writhing.

With a scream that shook the rafters, Edgar sat up in bed, his eyes

open wide and his face etched with fear. Maude had barely a moment to register it, let alone do anything to stop it, as his violent upward motion sent her flying.

She sailed through the air and came crashing down onto the hard wooden floor, her head striking the nightstand. Maude saw stars bursting behind her eyes and was swept away by a wave of dizziness.

She laid on the ground for a moment, stunned and unable to move. Her head sang with pain and darkness crept in at the edges of her vision.

She clung to consciousness, willing herself not to pass out.

And then Edgar was there beside her, scooping her up and gently laying her down onto the bed. He tucked the pillow behind her head, looking down at her with fear in his eyes.

But this time, it wasn't fear of whatever haunted his dreams. It was fear for her.

"Maude. Oh, God, are you all right?" he gasped. "Please, tell me you're all right."

"I'm all right," she said, hoping that was true.

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt you…"

Edgar's voice trailed off, but his eyes were red and as he looked at her, the realization of what he'd done seemed to be sinking in for him.

"I just felt somebody on top of me. I didn't know it was you. I'd

never hurt you, Maude. Please believe me."

"I know you wouldn't," she said. "This wasn't your fault. It was mine.

"You were having a bad dream, and I should have known better than to try to wake you so suddenly. It's my fault."

Her head still rang and stars danced in her vision, but she put her hand on his arm, trying to get through to him that it wasn't his fault.

He looked both disgusted with himself and entirely helpless. She knew he'd never purposely hurt her and she hated seeing him beat himself up for it.

But this was the worst it had ever been. He was plagued with nightmares most every night, though it usually amounted to a few cries and some restlessness.

It had never been like this, and Maude knew it had to do with Captain Landon's appearance. If, in fact, it was him.

It seemed too coincidental—if it really was him, she thought God had a pretty sick sense of humor.

But Anna's stories about former Confederate soldiers rampaging through the west rang true for Maude. She'd heard much the same back in Boston, but had written it off as gossip.

She had apparently been wrong to do that. Still, she thought it might be possible that Edgar had simply mistaken the man in town for this Captain Landon.

Suffering through the sort of trauma and torment he had probably —and understandably—made him see that man's face everywhere.

"Captain Landon," she started, "the man you saw in town… he was the one who held you prisoner in the war, wasn't he?"

Edgar stiffened for a moment but then nodded curtly. "He was. And he's here. In Wellington Flats."

"Are you sure it was him? Could you have mistaken somebody who looks like him for the—"

"The man kept and tortured me for years, Maude. Years," he cut in, his voice suddenly ice cold.

"I know every inch of his face and will always be able to pick him out of a crowd of thousands. It was him. He's here."

A bolt of fear shot through Maude as she thought about it. If it truly was this Captain Landon, she feared for Edgar. But she also saw an opportunity.

The way things were going, Maude knew their marriage would be over inside a year. They just couldn't keep going on like this.

"Edgar, we need to find a way to get through this. And that means you're going to need to talk to me. Open up to me," she said.

"I don't need to know all the details, but you need to start purging this from your soul. You're safe with me. You can talk to me. You need to."

"I don't know if I can, Maude. I don't know if I can get past the things I've done."

“You have to, or this—what we’re trying to build here—will all be for naught. Our home, our marriage… it will all crumble to pieces,” she said.

“If you can’t find a way to forgive this Captain Landon, and more importantly, to forgive yourself and find some peace within you—”

“Don’t you think I want to?”

“Do you, though?” she pressed. “Do you really?”

“Of course I do,” he snapped, sounding offended.

“The way I see it right now, you’re holding onto all of that guilt and shame. You carry it around with you like some sort of a safety blanket,” she said, sounding sharper than she’d intended.

“It’s like you feel if you let yourself forgive and move forward, you’ve done something wrong. You seem intent on punishing yourself when there’s nothing you should be punishing yourself for.

“And, more than that,” she added, “you’re punishing me, too.”

Edgar opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again. He looked away from her, unable to meet her eyes.

She knew that was the moment when things would either start heading in the right direction, or he was going to give up and let them slide into ruin.

“Your past and everything you endured is like a poison in your soul,” she said gently.

“And what do you do when you’re snakebit? You cut the wound and suck the poison out. This isn’t any different.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” he replied. “Besides, I wouldn’t know how to start sucking out the poison.”

“You can start by trusting me. By opening up to me,” she said. “I’m in this with you and want to help you get past this.

“I want you to be happy and to understand just how much I love you. I want you to see how amazing our life can be.”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he sat there, staring at the wall.

She could see him thinking, though, and she hoped she was getting through and finally cracking that shell he kept around himself.

“You don’t deserve to be punished, Edgar. You’ve suffered enough. Don’t torture yourself anymore. Captain Landon’s done enough of that,” she implored him.

“And I certainly don’t deserve to be punished along with you. I love you, Edgar. But I can’t keep doing this. I won’t.”

He remained silent for a moment, but then got to his feet and left the room. Maude’s heart sank and she wanted to cry. But she held back her tears.

She would not pity herself. She’d done everything she could. She’d given Edgar everything she could… her love, trust, and a safe space to open up and talk about his past traumas.

She’d told him she would be there for him. She had done everything she could to put things to right between them.

Maude hated it, and it broke a little piece of her to admit it, but everything else was up to him now. If this marriage was going to be saved—if he himself was going to be saved—Edgar had to do it.

29

The sun beat down on him and his face was coated with sweat. His shirt clung to him uncomfortably with it, but Edgar continued plowing the field, driving himself to the point of exhaustion.

The tedious work of getting his fields ready for planting helped take his mind off everything. At the same time, it allowed him to focus.

The physical labor seemed to clear his mind and drown out all of the unnecessary noise enough that it allowed him to actually think.

What had happened the other night with Maude still tormented him. That he'd come so close to seriously hurting her had shaken him to the core.

It wasn't his fault. He could accept that. It was nobody's fault, really. But the simple fact that his nightmares had caused him to do that to her ate away at him.

And it got him thinking about everything she'd said. He'd done little else the last couple of days but dwell on her words. Deep down, she knew he was right.

He needed to find a way to get past what happened in the camp. He needed to find a way to purge the things he'd seen… the things he'd done.

He needed to find a way to forgive Landon, but more than anything, he needed to find a way to forgive himself.

"I need to suck out the poison," he muttered to himself, echoing Maude's words.

He tried to tell himself he'd only been trying to survive and that he shouldn't continue punishing himself for the things he'd done. But no matter how many times he repeated it to himself, the words rang hollow.

That he'd killed for the amusement of one man galled him. Landon had forced him to do things that no human should be made to do, just to survive.

He'd only done them because of the letter he'd kept secreted in his pocket. He'd so desperately wanted to get back to Maude.

And now that he was there, now that he had her, what was he doing? Ruining the chance he'd been given.

He had survived the camp and found his way back to her only to let the experience drive a wedge between them. Only to let his past poison the one pure thing in his life.

Edgar knew if he didn't find a way to let go of his hate and anger, to finally bury those old ghosts that continued to haunt him once and for all, that poison would rot everything good in his life.

A bolt of fear struck him and his heart started to race when he saw

three men coming down his road on horseback. Imagining that it was Landon and a couple of his men coming for him, he looked around for a weapon.

He snatched the knife that hung in a sheath from the handle of the plow and gripped it tight. As the riders approached, Edgar made his way out to the yard, putting himself between them and the house where Maude and Anna were.

The riders reined to a stop in front of him and he let out a sigh of relief as they dismounted. Jaws stepped forward, his eyes on the blade in Edgar's hand.

He looked back up at Edgar. "Expectin' trouble?" he asked.

Edgar shrugged. "Trouble just has a way of findin' me, I suppose."

Jaws laughed as he gestured to the two men beside him. "Edgar, this is Sheriff Ned Tompkins, and Monty Richards, town banker."

Edgar stepped forward and shook hands with the two men, greeting them. His anxiety was rearing its head, but he managed to stifle it.

He still felt fragile, uneven, as if he was teetering on an edge thinner than the blade of the knife in his hand. But he was able to swallow it all down.

The three men before him wore grim expressions and had obviously come for a reason.

Tompkins wasn't an exceptionally large man. His hair was cut short and dark, but shot through with gray, the same as the long mustache he wore.

He was lean, his body narrow. But he had the flinty-eyed stare of a man who knew his business and knew how to go about it.

He looked like a man who could handle himself in a fight just fine.

The banker, Richards, was tall and gangly. With pale skin, unnaturally long fingers, and dark, narrow eyes that were in constant motion, he reminded Edgar more of an undertaker.

But then, Edgar didn't know any bankers—maybe they all looked like that. Or maybe there was some crossover between the two professions. He didn't know.

All Edgar knew was that he wouldn't count on the banker's help if it came down to a fight. He didn't look like a man who knew the barrel from the butt of a gun.

"As nice as it is to meet y'all, what can I do for you gentlemen?" Edgar asked. "Since I'm assumin' y'all aren't the welcomin' committee."

"True enough," said Sheriff Tompkins, his hard tone matching his expression.

"There's a group of former Confederate soldiers who've moved into the area," Monty said, his voice high-pitched and nasally. "

They've ransacked a couple of businesses and have tried to rob the bank. Killed two people."

"Tried to rob the bank?" Edgar asked.

Monty opened his coat to reveal a Colt Dragoon Revolver in a holster on his hip, surprising Edgar. "Tried," he said.

He never would have imagined the banker was handy with a weapon that size… or any weapon, really. Maybe he'd misjudged the man.

But he also thought Monty had likely gotten the drop on Landon because the captain had misjudged him the same way Edgar had just done.

If there was one thing Edgar knew about Landon, it was that the captain was a determined and relentless man and would not stop until he'd gotten what he wanted.

There was no doubt in Edgar's mind that he would be back to the bank… and better prepared.

"Not to be too blunt with y'all, but what does any of that have to do with me?" Edgar asked the trio.

Ned looked at him, seeming to be sizing him up, taking his measure, but he didn't say anything for a moment. It was Jaws who spoke.

"To be direct, we're putting together a group of men who know their way around a gun, to build a defense," Jaws said.

"We won't let these yellow cowards take Wellington Flats the way they've taken other towns. We've worked too hard and put too much of our own blood, sweat, and tears into this place to simply hand it over to brigands like that."

Edgar's heart was thundering so hard inside of him, he wondered if the three men standing before him could hear it. The thought of taking Captain Landon head-on like that terrified him.

It shamed him to admit, and Edgar didn't like to think of himself as yellow, but the captain held a power over him. Even still, all this time later, just the thought of the cruel Confederate chilled him right down to the bones.

"I'm not much of a fighter. Never have been," Edgar told them. "I'm a rancher, fellas. I'm just tryin' to get my life back on track here."

"You were a Union man weren't you?" Sheriff Tompkins pressed. "Fought in the war between the states?"

"How did you know that?" Edgar asked.

The wry grin that curled his lips made his big, bushy mustache twitch. "Got an eye for it, I suppose. I can always tell.

"Somethin' around the eyes, I guess. Men who've seen combat all have that same haunted look about 'em."

Edgar chuckled softly. The sheriff was obviously a sharp, observant man. And one, Edgar guessed, who had also seen some combat during the war.

He, too, had that haunted look about him. Overlaying that was a veneer of pure steel, however. Tompkins was a hard man. A strong man. Unflappable.

In some ways, he reminded Edgar of Sergeant O'Malley—tough and unafraid of anything. Even death.

It shamed him to see that, since he was dealing with his own traumas so poorly.

To see a man as strong as Sheriff Tompkins, who seemed unaffected by what he'd experienced in the war, made Edgar feel terrible about himself and how he was dealing with what the war had done to him.

"I don't know that I can help all that much, fellas," Edgar admitted. "I'm honestly not much for fightin'."

Sheriff Tompkins nodded, looking at him as if he knew what was really holding him back. As if he could see into Edgar's soul and somehow knew what he'd endured.

His look wasn't unkind, nor was it judgmental. It was simply understanding. And that was something Edgar appreciated.

"These brigands are hittin' the area homesteads. I'm sure they'll come for the town eventually, but right now, they're busy gettin' fat on the farms," Sheriff Tompkins said.

"You can be sure they'll be comin' for your home here sooner rather than later. If you have any weapons or any way to defend your home, get to it—you do not want to be caught unawares by these men."

"I appreciate the warning," Edgar said.

The three men mounted up and rode off. And as Edgar watched them go, he felt himself grow cold as the certainty that a fight was coming settled down over him.

Edgar walked back into the house and past the questioning looks of Anna and Maude. He went into the bedroom and opened his wardrobe.

Pushing past the clothes that hung inside, he found his old Sharps Carbine and the gunbelt that housed a pair of Colt Revolvers that matched the one Monty the banker wore on his hip.

Aside from cleaning and keeping them oiled, Edgar had not touched his weapons since the war.

He did not want this fight. He did not want to ever have to use his weapons again. But what bothered him more was that he didn't know if he could.

30

"What do you think he'll do?" Maude asked.

Anna peered out of the window, a frown touching her lips. "I don't know."

"What's he doing?"

"Same thing he's been doing the last couple of hours."

Maude sighed and stared into the flames of the hearth. Edgar had been more quiet than usual over the last couple of days.

After the three men left, he had told them what they'd said, and it had left Maude terrified.

The thought of armed bandits coming to take their farm at gunpoint was bad enough. But knowing it was the man who had tortured Edgar and left him in the state he was in made it even worse.

Since then, Edgar had been withdrawn and sullen. He spent hours at a time sitting outside, just like he was now, staring up at the sky, lost in thought.

He wasn't eating and he wasn't sleeping. He was doing the bare minimum to take care of himself, and that worried Maude more than anything.

She couldn't imagine what was going through his heart or mind, knowing a confrontation with Captain Landon, the man who broke him, was coming.

And he wouldn't tell her.

"What do you think we should do?" Maude asked.

Anna sighed and walked back over to the hearth, dropping down into the chair beside Maude. She frowned and turned her gaze to the flames, as well.

Maude could see Anna was every bit as worried as she was, and she suspected the older woman was more concerned about Edgar than anything. Just like she was.

"I honestly don't know," she said softly.

"I can't imagine what would become of Edgar if the captain took his home from him. Not after everything he's taken from Edgar already."

Maude nodded. "I had the same thought, actually. I can't even begin to imagine what this is doing to him inside."

"And he's not telling us."

A rueful laugh fell from Maude's lips. "I had that thought, as well."

They both fell quiet for a moment, both of them staring into the

fire, lost inside their own thoughts. In the silence that gripped the house, the crackle and pop of the fire seemed impossibly loud.

“I don’t care who it is, I don’t want to lose this house,” Maude declared. “This is our home. We’ve worked hard for it. We deserve this.”

“I agree,” Anna said. “And I’m willing to fight, too.”

“I’m not sure Edgar wants to, though,” Maude replied. “We should be making plans. Preparing.

“I mean, it’s been a couple of days already. How long do you think we have before Captain Landon and his men show up?”

Anna shook her head. “I don’t know. It could be tomorrow. It could be a week from now. A month. Who can say?”

“We should be using our time to prepare. Fortifying this place,” she said. “I don’t know anything about making war or fighting, but I’m sure we need to do something to make things better defended.”

Anna nodded. “We also need guns. I don’t know what we have.”

Maude frowned. “I only know of one rifle and two pistols. Edgar hides them in the back of his wardrobe. I’ve only ever seen him touch them when he cleans them.”

“Well, it’s better than nothing, I suppose.”

“Not if Edgar doesn’t want to fight. We need his help to defend this place.”

They both fell silent, matching frowns on their faces. Maude knew

Edgar wouldn't let them fight. He would be too worried about them.

But shouldn't this be her decision to make? This was her home. Shouldn't she have the right to defend it?

Edgar liked to tell her she couldn't understand war because she'd never been in one. That she couldn't truly understand what it was to take a life because she had never taken one.

And that was true. She had never been to war, and had never taken a life. And, God willing, she would never have to do either.

She hoped Landon would either pass them by, or the situation could be settled without violence. But she suspected that violent confrontation was a foregone conclusion—and she wanted to be prepared for when it came.

She wanted to defend her home. She felt it was her right. And if Edgar wasn't going to do it, Maude steeled herself for the responsibility.

"He's scared," Anna finally said. "You know he's always hated confrontation.

"He wouldn't have gone to fight in that damn war if it hadn't been for the allure of this land. He would have stayed home if not for that."

"I know," Maude replied. "And now that he knows a fight is coming and probably can't be avoided, I'm sure it's beyond difficult for him."

"But he won't listen to us," Anna said. "Won't hear anything we

have to say."

Maude nodded. "Right. Because we haven't experienced the things he has."

"And I'm afraid that he's simply going to step aside and let this Landon fellow take what he wants," Anna said. "It's the only way to avoid a fight."

"But I've heard stories about men like this—if we simply step aside, we won't have a home left. They'll burn it to the ground."

"Exactly."

"So, what do we do?"

Anna shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know anybody who has the sort of experiences he's had that he'll listen to."

Maude sat back in the chair and thought about it. She knew of nobody who'd gone through what Edgar had, nobody whom he respected who could get through to him.

She didn't think that person existed. But, just as the thought passed through her mind, she sat up and realized she was wrong.

"What is it?" Anna asked, a nervous quiver in her voice. "Did you hear something?"

"No, I had a thought."

Maude jumped to her feet and raced over to the desk that stood in the corner. She rifled through all of the drawers, going through stacks of papers and letters, and almost shouted with joy and relief

when she found what she was looking for.

The envelope in her hand was addressed to Edgar and remained unopened. But Maude felt a rush of triumph as she looked at the return address—even more so when she realized he wasn't very far away at all.

She held the envelope up for Anna to see. The older woman looked back at her with an expression of curiosity on her face.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Help. Help getting through to Edgar, and help to defend our home," she replied.

31

Edgar watched Monty ride off, the sense of dread that pressed down on him growing ever heavier.

For days now, Edgar had been hoping, wishing, and praying that the day wouldn't come. That somehow, Landon would avoid their farm and simply pass them by.

He'd been hoping against all hope that a confrontation wasn't truly in the offing, and he wouldn't have to make the decision that was now staring him directly in the face.

He paced the yard, his mind whirling with the implications of what Monty had just told him. There was no getting around it now. The fight was coming.

What Edgar needed to decide was how he was going to react to it.

It didn't help that the fight was being led by Captain Landon. The thought of that man standing before him again sent a current of fear, thick and deep, rippling through him.

Even after all this time, the man still held Edgar in his thrall. Just the sound of the man's name sent Edgar into a near panic.

As he paced, breathing in the cool morning air, he thought about what Maude had told him—had been telling him for months now. If there ever was a time he needed to leave the past behind him and focus on the future, it was now.

He needed to discard his fear and get his mind on doing what was necessary to protect what was his.

Landon had taken so much from him—was Edgar really going to let him take his home? His wife? Everything?

With a sigh, Edgar turned and walked back into the house to find Maude standing in the kitchen, an expression of worry on her face. She wrung her hands in front of her, shifting from foot to foot.

He could see she was looking to him for answers to what was happening. Edgar stood where he was and ran a hand through his hair as he tried to order his thoughts.

“What did he have to say?” she finally asked.

Edgar cleared his throat. “He said that Landon and his gang are moving west.

“They hit the next farm over,” he said. “They’ll be here probably in the next couple of days or so, I suppose.”

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

He chewed on his bottom lip, trying to put his thoughts into his words. He had been running through a hundred different scenarios in his mind, but kept coming back to one thing: his necessity to protect the woman he loved.

“I need you to pack some things,” Edgar finally said. “I’ll tell my mother to do the same.”

“Pack some things? What are you talking about?”

“We’re goin’ somewhere for a few days. Getting out of here until Landon’s gang has passed and it’s clear.”

Maude stared at him, her jaw hanging open. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m very serious.”

“Edgar, if we leave, we’ll have no home to come back to,” she pointed out.

He shifted on his feet, his frown deepening. “It’s possible. It’s also possible that Landon will just take what he wants and go.

“If we’re not here to resist, there’s no reason for him to burn our home,” he said.

“The only people he’s harmed and the only homes he’s burned have been because people offered resistance. Those who didn’t fight were left alive and with their homes still standing.”

“Edgar, this is our home. These are our things.”

“It’s just a house. They’re just things,” he said forcefully. “Everything can be replaced—everything except you and my mom. I won’t risk your life.”

“I’m willing to risk my life to keep my home out of the hands of a scoundrel like this Landon,” she said, her face darkening.

“You can go if you want, but I’m staying. I’m going to fight.”

“Maude, if somethin’ happened to you, it would kill me. I couldn’t bear my life without you. Especially if I didn’t do all I could to keep you safe,” Edgar growled.

“I won’t let you put your life at risk over a pile of wood and stone —things that can be replaced.”

She opened her mouth to argue further, but a knock at the door cut her off before she started to speak.

Edgar knew it wasn’t his mother, since she usually just walked in through the back door. She didn’t often come through the front.

An icy fist of fear gripped him as he moved toward the door, not knowing who was on the other side. Was it Monty? Jaws?

Or was it Landon?

He gave brief thought to going to retrieve his gun, but opted against it. He didn’t want to fight, nor did he want to escalate a situation to the point where he might not have any other choice.

Edgar turned back to Maude and saw concern on her face that matched his own. He waved her toward the back door.

“Get close to the door. You need to run—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said stubbornly, planting her feet. “This is my home and I’m going to fight for it.”

Edgar sighed and the knocking repeated. It struck him as a little odd for Landon to be knocking if he was just going to ransack the

house—perhaps it wasn't him, after all.

Reaching out, he turned the knob and opened the door. And when Edgar saw who was standing there, he nearly fell to his knees.

Waves of disbelief battered him and his stomach turned over on itself as he looked at the man. It was just one more old ghost rising up from his past.

"How?" Edgar asked.

"How are ya doin', laddy?" Sergeant O'Malley asked.

32

Edgar looked from O'Malley to Maude, questions in his eyes.

A smile touched her lips and her eyes suddenly grew red and watery as she clasped her hands in front of her mouth.

"How?" he repeated.

"Your wife writes a very compellin' letter," O'Malley said.

"Please, come in. And forgive my husband's lack of manners," Maude said as she stepped forward and took his hand. "It's lovely to meet you, Sergeant O'Malley."

The large Irishman beamed at her, his smile wide but mostly hidden by his thick, bushy rust-colored beard.

"Please," he said. "Just call me Gregory."

Edgar watched the big Irishman walk into the house, still not believing what he was seeing.

He looked exactly the same as the last time Edgar saw him, save for the fact that he'd put on some weight and looked healthier. He also had a little more gray in his beard and hair than Edgar

remembered.

“How are you here?” Edgar asked.

“Got on my horse and rode,” he said, chuckling in that familiar, deep rumble.

“You know what I mean.”

Gregory shrugged. “You never returned any of my letters. I took that kind of personal, lad.”

Edgar frowned. “I meant to. It’s just… I meant to.”

“I get it,” he replied. “But it’s a good thing your wife here took the initiative and dropped me a line or I might never have seen you again.”

Edgar cast a look over at Maude, questions rattling around in his mind. She stared back at him, lifting her chin in defiance, and spoke before he could.

“I did my duty as your wife, Edgar,” she said.

“Your duty?”

“I’ve tried to help you. I’ve given you comfort. Tried to make sure you knew I was here for you.

“I tried to give you a safe space to open up and talk to me. To rid yourself of these burdens you carry. But it wasn’t enough.

“As you’ve said to me many times, because I didn’t endure what you did, I can’t relate, nor can I understand what you’ve gone

through," she said.

"Did you really say that, lad?" Gregory asked, sounding disappointed.

Edgar shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. Hearing his words echoed back to him made him feel terrible.

They sounded a lot worse than he'd intended them to be. He could understand, now, just how hurtful he'd been.

"I never meant to hurt you with my words," he told his wife. "I wasn't thinkin' about how it might sound. I'm sorry."

"If we were still in uniform and I were still your superior, I'd slap you around a little bit," Gregory put in.

Edgar gave him a wry grin. "And I reckon you'd be right to do so."

"Damn right, I would be," Gregory said, then cast a glance at Maude. "Pardon my language, ma'am."

"Please. Just call me Maude."

Gregory smiled and turned back to Edgar. "She's every bit as beautiful as you said. And she's also a lot better than you deserve."

Edgar looked at Maude and saw she was blushing, then he looked away for a moment. He finally turned to Gregory and nodded.

"She is better than I deserve."

"How about some breakfast?" Maude offered, breaking the sudden awkward tension in the room. "I was just making it. Are you

hungry, Serg—Gregory?"

"Ravenous," he replied. "Been on the road most of the night."

"Great. Come and sit down," she invited.

Edgar and Gregory sat across from each other at the table and she served them both coffee. They made small talk as Maude finished cooking breakfast, with Edgar asking about Gregory's life and how he'd ended up in the Wyoming Territory.

Like Edgar, Gregory had taken the land grant, and as it turned out, he'd settled half a day's ride away.

Edgar couldn't get over how good the big Irishman looked. He looked fit and lean. Healthy. But what really struck him was that he looked happy.

"Biscuits and gravy are all right, I hope," Maude said.

She laid out plates of fresh biscuits, a tureen of gravy, a plate of bacon, and some hard boiled eggs. That done, she refilled their coffee, poured a cup for herself, and joined them at the table.

"It's more than all right. And it smells fantastic," Gregory said. "I'm not much of a cook myself, so this is a feast fit for a king."

Maude smiled and they all tucked into their meals. They talked as they ate. Or rather, Gregory and Maude did most of the talking as Edgar listened.

They sounded like old friends, and there was an ease between them that surprised him. But Edgar supposed that was what well-adjusted people sounded like.

It was hard for him to remember what that felt like, to have a normal, easy conversation was like. He knew it wasn't all that long ago, if he counted Jaws and Monty, but it sometimes seemed like another lifetime.

But then, despite his dark mood, Edgar felt himself pulled into their conversation. Gregory and Edgar told Maude some of their stories from the war… before their capture.

There had been some good times they recounted that had Edgar laughing. Things he'd forgotten about.

Edgar had spent so much time wallowing in his misery, tied to the horrible things he'd endured, he'd allowed himself to forget that there were good people and that he'd had some good times.

And he marveled at Gregory for being able to do what he could not.

Edgar finally pushed back from his meal, his belly full and his spirit lighter than it had been in quite some time. He looked over at Maude and gave her a smile of gratitude.

She smiled back at him, her eyes sparkling. In that moment, she was more beautiful than she'd ever been, and he loved her more than he ever had.

"Why don't you boys go for a walk and get reacquainted with each other," she suggested. "I'll clean up here."

"Let me help," Gregory and Edgar both said in unison.

She laughed. "No. Go for a walk. Talk. It's been a long time and I'm sure you two have a lot to catch up on."

“Thank you, Maude. Breakfast was amazin’,” Gregory told her.

“Yes, thank you,” Edgar said, then added, “for everything.”

She gave him a warm smile. “You’re welcome.”

33

Edgar and Gregory walked along the banks of the river that flowed through his land. The sun rained down on them, casting a pleasant warmth in the air.

The soft babbling of the river filled Edgar's ears, and the birds overhead chirped and tweeted, flitting from branch to branch.

"You've got a beautiful home, lad. Beautiful land," Gregory said. "I think I should've claimed my land here."

"It's the most beautiful land I've ever seen," Edgar agreed. "I couldn't possibly be happier."

Gregory looked over at him. "Happy, are ya?"

Edgar nodded. "Yeah."

"Funny. Because you look to me like you're bloody miserable, lad."

Edgar fell silent, not exactly sure what to say to that. The simple fact was that Gregory was right. He *was* miserable.

He had hoped that marrying Maude and moving out there to the

Yellowstone Valley, getting his ranch working, would somehow strip away all of the pain and misery that were his constant companions.

He'd hoped it would bury those old ghosts and let him move forward, free and clear, untethered from the past.

And he'd been wrong. A change of scenery and a new bride hadn't made anything better.

His anger and misery hadn't faded much, and his past clung to him as tightly as ever. His problems hadn't gone anywhere simply because he'd moved away.

And he realized there was nowhere in this world he could go to escape them.

"You've got a good woman, lad—a very good woman. She loves you a lot."

"I know," Edgar replied. "And most days I feel like I don't deserve her."

He shrugged. "And you never will. No matter what you do," he said with a chuckle.

"But I'm glad you finally ended up with her. She's the only thing that helped you survive that hell hole."

Edgar nodded. "She is. Without her—without the hope of one day being with her—I don't know that I would have."

"Then why are you so intent on makin' her as miserable as you are?" his friend asked.

Edgar sighed. “I’m not tryin’ to.”

“I know you’re not, lad,” Gregory said softly. “But there’s a big part of you that never left that cellar. And you’re forcin’ her to live there with you.”

Edgar walked along, his eyes on the banks of the river. Gregory walked with him in silence, perhaps giving him some time to think about what he’d said.

And he wasn’t wrong. Edgar knew that. But he also didn’t know how to free them both from that pit of hell.

“She deserves better than that,” Gregory finally said. “But I suspect you already know that.”

Edgar nodded. “I do.”

“So then the question becomes, what are you goin’ to do about it, lad?”

“I don’t know, Gregory,” he replied softly. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Bollocks. There’s always something you can do,” he replied. “It’s a question of whether you have the will to do it.”

Gregory stopped at the edge of the river and bent down, picking up a rock. He cocked his arm and launched it out into the current.

Edgar slipped his hands into his pockets and watched the ripples spreading across the surface of the water where the rock went in.

“How do you do it?” he asked. “How do you seem so normal, so...

you? After everything we endured, you don't seem to have changed a bit."

Gregory laughed softly. "Then I'm a better actor than I thought," he said.

"Truth is, you don't go through somethin' like we did without it changin' you. It leaves scars on your very soul. Uglier than the ones Landon left on our bodies."

Edgar nodded. "Ain't that the truth."

"For a long while, I was as big of a wreck as you are. But I figured out that I had a choice.

"I realized that I can let those scars define me, or I could wake up every day and decide to not let them. You have that choice too, Edgar," he said.

"It sounds ridiculous, I know. But we always have a choice. We can choose who we want to be each and every day."

Edgar laughed softly. "You're right. It sounds ridiculous."

Gregory turned and looked at him. "Tell me this. When you wake up in the mornin', you ever feel so angry that you want to kill somebody?"

He shook his head. "God knows after what we went through, it's understandable."

"Yeah," Edgar admitted, "I suppose, sometimes, I do."

"Uh huh. And you ever go out and kill somebody?"

“Of course not.”

Gregory grinned. “And why is that?”

“Because I just don’t,” Edgar said. “It’s not who I am.”

“Right. Because you make the choice to not be that man.”

“It’s not a choice,” he countered.

“Sure it is,” Gregory said. “Maybe not one you consciously have to make, but it’s a choice all the same, lad. You’re choosin’ not to be that man.”

Edgar bit back his next reply and thought about what Gregory had said. There was an echo of truth in his words, but Edgar was still having a hard time believing them completely.

It was difficult for him to accept he could simply choose to not be miserable anymore, that he could choose to set aside his pain and the terrible memories that came with it. It just didn’t make sense to him.

“I have nightmares, too. Nasty ones,” Gregory confessed. “Almost every night. I’m haunted, lad—same as you, I suspect.”

Edgar nodded. “Same as me.”

“I’ve got bouts of anger. Dark moods. I have been known to be extremely unpleasant to be around from time to time,” he said.

“Now that I believe,” Edgar replied with a laugh.

“But you know what I do when that darkness comes on me?”

“Choose to be happy?” Edgar said, a mocking tone in his voice.

He shrugged. “Yes. That’s part of it,” he said. “But I also count my blessings. I say it out loud, everything I’m thankful for.

“And I repeat it two or three times, just to reinforce the point. It’s important that we always remember there are things for us to be grateful for, Edgar.”

“That simple?”

“That simple. There is always something to be grateful for, lad. Even if it’s only the fact that you’re still alive. That you survived,” he said.

“But you’ve got a hell of a lot more than that to be thankful for—not the least of which is that wife of yours. It all comes down to what you choose to feed, lad: the darkness or the light.”

Somewhere inside of himself, Edgar knew there was wisdom in Gregory’s words. He did have a great many things to be grateful for.

He should be thankful that he was alive and had survived the camp. If he thought about it, there truly were many blessings in his life.

“So, now that we have that out of the way,” Gregory started, “what’s this I hear about dear old Captain Landon bein’ in the area and wantin’ to take your farm from you?”

“You heard the right of it,” Edgar replied.

“So? What are you gonna do about it?”

“Take Maude away from here. Get her to safety.”

“Doesn’t seem like she was inclined to go anywhere,” Gregory pointed out. “Seemed like she wanted to stay and fight.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talkin’ about. Doesn’t know what it is to fight.”

“Maybe not. But she’s not content to let that bastard storm in here and take your land from you,” Gregory said.

“And I tell ya what. There’s nothin’ in the world I wouldn’t give to have a shot at that bastard. I’d love to give him just a taste of what he put us through.

“Haven’t you ever thought about it? Ever thought about taking a pound of flesh from him?”

Edgar grimaced. “I’d be lyin’ if I said I haven’t.”

“Then this is your chance. We can put him down, here and now,” Gregory said. “We can end our nightmares, Edgar. All we have to do is fight.”

“All we have to do is fight,” Edgar murmured.

They stood on the banks of the river, the soft babbling water suddenly sounding ominous to Edgar’s ears. Everything Gregory had talked about seemed so simple.

The idea that he had a choice seemed easy. The trouble was, Edgar didn’t know if it truly was. Or if he had the strength to do any of it.

The one thing he could say, though, as they headed back for the

house, was that he found some comfort and solace in the fact that Gregory had endured much of what he had. The nightmares, the anger… all of it.

It made Edgar feel like he wasn't alone, after all. There was somebody who could relate to him and truly understand what he had gone through, and what he felt.

And there was a small flicker of hope inside of him that wanted to believe that he, like Gregory, could choose to live differently. Could choose to be different.

It wasn't much, but it was there all the same.

34

Maude watched them returning from the window, and when they came in, Edgar swept her up in his arms in a tight embrace.

He planted a gentle kiss on her lips, surprising her. As he held her, he looked down into her eyes and gave her a small smile.

“Thank you for this,” he said. “You always seem to know what’s best for me.”

She returned his smile. “I like to think I do.”

Gregory stayed for supper and Maude grew to like him enormously. He was a good man with a terrific sense of humor.

He had them in stitches and seeing Edgar’s old personality, so lively and animated, and laughing more than he had in years, made Maude happier than she could recall being in quite some time.

She also noticed that there was some chemistry developing between Gregory and Anna, which she thought interesting.

She also knew Anna well enough to know that nothing would ever come of it. Eventually, she would return home to Edgar's father.

But it was interesting, nonetheless.

Later on, they set Gregory up in the second cottage for the night. Maude was glad he had agreed to stay the night and was even happier that he had agreed to stay until the threat of Captain Landon had passed, one way or the other.

It had been decided that they were going to make their stand and defend their home. There would be no running for them. And she had Gregory to thank for that, as well.

After getting ready for bed, Maude had just slipped beneath the covers when Edgar came in. He closed the door softly behind him, then sat on the edge of the bed near her.

He turned and looked at her for a long moment and Maude held her breath for a moment. She looked as if she was looking into the eyes of a new man.

Or, as Edgar liked to say, the old man.

In that moment, as they sat there with their gazes locked, he looked fully present. He looked more like the Edgar she'd given her heart to on the banks of the Double B all those years ago.

Seeing just how engaged he was with her filled Maude's heart with the brightest and purest light of joy she'd felt in a very, very long time.

Before she could speak, Edgar started telling her a story from his time in the camp. He told her about a time Captain Landon had

starved them for three days.

When they were half out of their minds with hunger, the captain had thrown a knife down into the cellar, and then a large piece of meat. The scramble and fight was on almost immediately.

As he told the story, Edgar's skin paled and that look of shame crossed his face once more. But instead of withdrawing into himself as he had done before, he stayed there, in the moment with her.

"I killed a man for food, Maude," he confided quietly. "Sliced him open so me and Gregory could eat. Like I was an animal."

Maude's sorrow for him was bottomless and she took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

She couldn't believe the agony she heard in his voice, but completely understood why he was so grief-stricken. And why he felt so guilty.

"You didn't have a choice, Edgar."

"I did. I could have let somebody else have the food. I made the choice to grab the knife and fight for the food," he said.

"And that's something you shouldn't beat yourself up for. You were put in an impossible situation. I don't know of anybody who wouldn't have done the same."

He raised his eyes and looked at her.

"I have a hundred stories just like that," he said softly. "And that's why I feel so broken. So riddled with guilt. It's why I am the way I

am right now."

"I understand, Edgar. And I wish I could take your pain away. I can tell you that you shouldn't feel guilty until my dying day. But it's you that has to believe it," she said.

"But it's not your fault. And my heart hurts for you. I'm sorry you endured that, so sorry. And I'm grateful to you for opening up and sharing with me."

He pulled a small piece of paper, ragged and stained, from his pocket. He handed it over to her and she looked at it, easily recognizing her flowing script.

She looked up at him. "You still have it?" she asked.

He nodded. "It's the only thing that got me through those days," he said.

"And I realize that if I'm going to make it through these days, I'm going to have to learn to open up and trust you the way I trusted that letter.

"It saw me through my most desperate moments. And I see now that's what you have been doing for me. I'm sorry I didn't see that before now. Please, forgive me."

Maude smiled. "There's nothing to forgive. I love you."

Edgar pulled her to him, embracing her warmly. "And I love you. With everything in me. And I'm grateful to you, Maude. Grateful *for* you."

She melted against him, relishing his warmth and the feeling of his

body. She truly felt that this was a turning point for them.

He'd opened up to her, voluntarily, proving to her that things were going to be different.

But they still had one hurdle to clear before they could move forward together.

"What about Landon?" she asked. "Are we still going away?"

He shook his head. "No. We're staying and we're going to fight."

Maude gripped him tighter, her emotions a chaotic whirlwind inside of her. Love and happiness warred with uncertainty and fear.

But she took heart in knowing that whatever happened, she would be with Edgar and they would face it. Together.

35

Breakfast the next morning was a sober affair. Nobody spoke much, and there was a distinct lack of the sort of lightness and laughter that had marked the previous evening.

Instead, there was a heaviness and oppressive chill in the air.

They had no real reason for thinking it, nor any way of knowing what was going to happen that day, but all four of them just seemed to sense that Captain Landon was coming.

“When do you think he’ll come?” Maude asked.

Edgar shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“We should all probably get a good meal in us, then,” Anna offered.

Edgar looked over at Gregory. “Did you bring your weapons?”

The big Irishman gave him a smirk. “Of course I did. But I got to be honest and tell you, I ain’t fired ‘em since the war.”

Edgar chuckled. “Same here.”

“Well, that’s encouraging,” Anna joked.

“It’ll be fine,” Edgar replied. “I think we can remember how to point and pull.”

“I may need you to give me a refresher after we finish eating.”

All four of them laughed, though it was a nervous-sounding thing. Edgar looked over at Gregory.

“I don’t want this to get ugly if it doesn’t have to,” he said. “I don’t want any gunfire unless we have no other choice. Guns are a last resort.”

“I understand,” Gregory said. “But do you really think we’ll be able to reason with him?”

A wry laugh escaped Edgar. “I ain’t got no reason to think we can. But I at least want to give him a chance to reconsider his course of action.”

“That’s fair,” Gregory said. “But he never struck me as the kind of man who reconsidered his actions.”

“No. Nor me,” Edgar agreed. “But I don’t want anybody gettin’ hurt. Least of all my mother and Maude.”

“Or us,” Gregory said with a grin.

“Right. That, too.”

They shared a grin, the bond of camaraderie flowing through them. That sort of bond was what helped get them through their time in the camp.

Their humor was often the gallows type, but being able to laugh with one another had helped them retain some small shred of normalcy.

Landon had turned them all into animals, but Gregory and Edgar had held onto that piece of their humanity and refused to relinquish it. It wasn't much, but it was something Edgar was able to take pride in.

"Riders," Anna gasped.

His mother was staring through the window, her face pale, her eyes wide. She put a hand to her mouth and Edgar could see her trembling.

Maude was on her feet in an instant and standing behind his mother, her hands on her shoulders. She turned to him, fear etched into her features.

"Five of them in total," Maude reported.

Edgar was already on his feet, buckling his gunbelt on. Gregory followed suit, quickly strapping on his.

Gregory carried a double-barreled shotgun, and handed Edgar his carbine. They shared a look, their expressions grim but determined.

"I've got your back, lad," he said.

"And I've got yours. I'm glad you're here with me. Thank you."

Gregory grinned. "I should be thanking you. Or Maude, anyway. To have a shot at taking this bastard down has been a dream of

mine for a long while now."

Edgar turned to Maude. "Stay away from the windows. Both of you," he said firmly. "Just in case this goes bad, I don't want you in the line of fire."

"Don't let it go bad, then. And if it does, shoot first and shoot true," Maude advised, a mischievous smile on her face.

"I never knew you were so cold-blooded," he said.

"It's nice that I can still surprise you," she said quietly.

Edgar gave Gregory a nod. "All right. Let's do this."

"Right. Let's do it."

They walked out of the house together and Maude closed the door behind them. He had to hope she and his mother did as he asked and stayed away from the windows.

Something told him she wouldn't; she was a defiant and independent-minded woman. But he couldn't worry about that. He had to focus on the man in front of him.

He and Gregory walked down the steps and stood in the middle of the yard, between the riders and the house. Gregory took half a dozen steps to the right, trying to put himself on the flank of their small group.

Landon and his men sat tall in their saddles, guns in hand, looking at Edgar and Gregory. The air was thick with a sense of anticipation and the promise of violence.

Silence reigned between them all for a long moment and Edgar stared straight into Landon's eyes. His heart quivered with fear and his every nerve ending felt as if it was on fire.

But he found a way to master it. He stuffed his fear down, managing to lock it away deep inside of himself.

He was left with nothing but the fires of his anger, a righteous, burning thing flowing through his veins.

Narrowing his eyes at the former Confederate, he let his hatred shine through his eyes and, when he spoke, in the tone of his voice.

"Captain Landon," Edgar said. "It's been a long time."

36

“Do I know you?” Landon fired back.

His men looked from him, to Edgar and Gregory, and back again. Landon scrutinized him for a long moment.

And then his eyes widened and his mouth fell open into a perfect “O.”

The men with him looked at Edgar blankly. He was right. They were hard men. Dirty. They were men who took what they wanted and killed whoever got in their way.

“Well, I’ll be. Unbelievable,” he said as he turned to his men, slapping the man next to him in the shoulder. “You know who this is?”

The man looked at Edgar, then turned back to Landon and shook his head. Landon laughed uproariously, slapping his knee.

“This here’s Edwin—”

“Edgar,” he corrected him.

A flash of annoyance crossed Landon's features, making Edgar remember that the captain hated being corrected. A small, grim smile crossed his face.

"Edgar," he said mockingly. "And his big mick friend, O'Doul or something. They were both guests of mine at a prison camp back during the war."

"Guests," O'Malley spat. "That's one way to put it, I guess."

Landon shrugged. "Call it what you like. It's ancient history now."

"My name is Edgar Kettering," Edgar snapped. "And this is Gregory O'Malley."

Landon waved them off. "Fine, fine," he said. "I won't bother introducing you to my boys.

"You're either going to leave or not be alive much longer to remember them, anyway. I assume you know why we're here."

"I know why you're here," Edgar said. "But I'm afraid you're going to leave here empty-handed and disappointed."

"Well, see, that's where you're wrong," Landon said. "I'm goin' to take what I want and there's nothin' you can do about it.

"In case you didn't notice, you're outnumbered and outgunned."

"I hadn't noticed."

Landon laughed. "Well, I never did credit you Yanks with an abundance of brains," he said.

“So, how have you been, Edgar? Certainly looks like you’re doin’ well for yourself.”

“I’d be doin’ a lot better if you put Wellington Flats behind you,” Edgar said.

“Afraid I can’t do that. Not yet, anyway. We’ll leave eventually,” Landon said, “but not until we’ve suckled these teats dry. There’s a lot of good stuff to be had here.”

“I don’t want to fight, Landon,” Edgar said. “It doesn’t have to go this way.”

“Sad to say, if you refuse to surrender your home, it’s going to go this way,” he replied. “Now, I don’t want to kill you and yours, but I will if you don’t get out of my way and give me what I want.”

Edgar stepped forward, making sure to keep the barrel of his carbine lowered so as to avoid being provocative. He stood about six feet from Landon’s horse and looked the man in the eye.

“The things we did, we did in the course of a war. We followed orders,” Edgar said. “And, like you said before, it’s ancient history.

“I want to believe you’re not the same man who kept that camp and did the things you did. I want to believe you’re a better man than that.”

“You’d be wrong,” one of the men with Landon said, earning a dark glower from him.

The men with him chuckled, seemingly as amused by the remark as they were by Edgar’s appeal. Edgar remained undeterred.

He wanted to resolve this without violence. He wanted to get through to Landon, if at all possible, to find and speak to that piece of humanity inside of him.

He desperately wanted to believe that Landon was still a human being underneath it all, and wasn't truly the monster he'd been when he ran the prison camp.

"I want to believe that you were doing what you had to do to survive the war," Edgar continued. "Just like we all were doing back then."

"You sure do want to believe a lot of things," Landon said, eliciting a laugh from his men.

"I do. I want to believe in humanity again. I want to believe in everything you took from me all this time," Edgar said.

He was surprised at the words that had come out of his mouth, but even more surprised that he believed them. He truly did want to unburden himself.

He wanted to believe in humanity again. For himself. For Maude. And for all of the people in his life.

"Tell me something, Captain," Edgar pressed. "Do you have nightmares about the war? Do you have trouble forming connections to people?

"Do loud noises bother you? Do you often find yourself angry and upset for no reason?"

He stopped, though he could have listed off a dozen more things. Edgar watched Landon closely, looking for any sign of recognition.

And he did see Landon's face soften. Though Landon tried to hide it, Edgar could see that every single thing he'd listed off had hit a mark.

It told him, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Landon was suffering with everything he was. And for some reason, he found some sense of comfort in that.

It told Edgar there was still a scrap of humanity inside of the captain.

"Landon, I'm trying to forgive you for everything that happened back then. I'm trying to forgive myself," he said.

"I'm trying to move forward in my life and leave the past where it belongs. I don't want to hate you anymore, Captain. Please, don't do this."

The words had barely cleared his mouth when the shot rang out. Smoke drifted from the barrel of the pistol of the man on the end of their line.

Landon flashed the man a smirk, and then Edgar heard Gregory grunt and hit the ground with a meaty thud. He turned and saw his friend on the dirt, immediately flashing back to the day they were taken.

It was happening all over again.

That box inside of Edgar where he'd been keeping his emotions suddenly burst open. Terror gripped him and as he turned back to Landon, saw the man smiling, he wanted to turn tail and run.

He didn't want to be taken prisoner by Landon again. He'd barely

survived the first time and he knew he wouldn't survive it again.

Edgar watched as the smile slipped from Landon's face as his features hardened. Those faint embers of his humanity were gone; in its place was a cold mask of indifference.

He and all of his men had their guns trained on him.

"Thanks for your forgiveness, Edgar," Landon sneered. "Don't need it, though."

37

Maude screamed when she saw Gregory fall and all of the men turn their guns on Edgar. Anna clutched her arm, but Maude pulled away and ran to the door.

Anna was still calling her when Maude threw open the door and rushed to Edgar's side. He looked at her, his eyes wide with fear.

"I told you to say inside," Edgar whispered urgently. "What are you doin' out here, Maude?"

She looked down and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Gregory was alive. He'd been hit in the arm, but he was otherwise all right.

She signaled to Anna, who rushed from the house and helped get Gregory to his feet and toward the house, where she would begin tending to his wounds.

Landon and his men watched this all unfold, confusion on their faces. The men were looking to Landon and the man himself looked uncomfortable.

He wasn't giving them an order to fire, and Maude assumed it was

because he wouldn't shoot a woman. Apparently, there were some lines the man wouldn't cross.

As if thinking about him provoked a response, Landon cleared his throat.

"I'm a Southern gentleman, and we do not shoot women and children," he said to Maude, a wicked grin touching his lips.

"But I implore you to go on back into the house. My men here aren't from the South, you see."

Edgar looked at her, his eyes narrowed, his face stern. "Go on now. Get back into the house where you'll be safe."

"It's no safer in there than it is out here," she shot back. "And I think you know that. This is my home, too, and I'll defend it."

She knelt down and picked up Gregory's shotgun from the ground where it had fallen. Leveling the barrel at Landon, she hoped she looked like she knew what she was doing.

She made a mental note to herself to ask Edgar for shooting lessons when this was all over.

Landon leaned forward, resting his forearms on the pommel of his saddle, that wicked grin on his face growing wider.

"Well, Edgar," he said, his eyes still on Maude. "Is this your wife?"

"Yes," Edgar spat.

"She's a spitfire," he said. "You really are doing well for yourself."

“Landon, take your men and leave.”

“Afraid I can’t do that. Not until I get what I came for.”

“This is our home. We built it,” Maude snarled. “You can’t just come in here and take it from us.”

Landon looked at Edgar, rolling his eyes. “Are you really gonna hide behind your woman’s skirts?”

Edgar chuffed. “I’m lucky to have a woman as courageous as she is. If you think that’s a bad thing or makes me any less of a man, I don’t care,” he growled.

“I think it’d make me less of a man if I didn’t heed or listen to her.”

Landon laughed and turned back to Maude. “To answer your question, I’m afraid I *can* come in and take what I want, darlin’. See, that’s kind of what I do.”

“Well, that stops here,” she said.

“Does it, now?”

“Maude, go back into the house. Please,” Edgar whispered.

But Maude stood resolute. Undeterred.

“You say you’re a Southern gentleman?” she hissed. “What kind of gentleman wantonly steals what doesn’t belong to him and kills those who don’t comply?”

“A desperate gentleman,” he said. “We ain’t got much, you see. And we all want more. We want what you have.”

“I just want her,” one of his men said, a lascivious smile upon his lips. “You can keep what’s in the house, Landon. I’m just gonna take her.”

“You will not,” Landon snarled, as if offended by the suggestion. “We do not ravish women.”

“Maybe you don’t—”

The shot came so fast, nobody had time to react. Maude bit back the cry that was forming on her lips when the man slumped in his saddle and then fell from his horse.

He hit the ground with a wet-sounding thud and lay still. He was dead.

Maude glanced at Landon as he turned to the rest of his men, looking them all in the eye. Each turned away, abashed expressions on their faces.

Landon finally turned to her. “I’m sorry, darlin’,” he said. “I don’t tolerate that kind of talk, and I tolerate men who would spoil a woman like that even less.

“Believe me when I say, I will never let one of my men lay a hand on you.”

It was a strange gesture to Maude. He wouldn’t guarantee her safety, but he also wouldn’t allow his men to force themselves on her.

She and Edgar exchanged a glance, both of them seeming to try to understand this line he’d drawn in the sand. It emboldened her.

“Mr. Landon, I thank you for that. And I can see that, deep down, you’re a good man,” she said. “You’re just, as you said, desperate. Perhaps we can—”

“I’m not as good a man as you might think,” he cut her off.

“And my kindness and morals only go so far. Don’t think you can push or manipulate me into giving up what I came for.”

“Captain Landon,” Edgar tried, “I think you’re a better man than you want to let yourself believe. The fact that you shot that man proves it.

“Please, just leave. Put this town behind you and find a way to forgive yourself.”

“I grow tired of this conversation. It’s time to bring this to an end,” Landon snapped. “I am going to give you both one chance to leave.

“Take the two inside the house and just go. Leave this house to me for a few days.

“Because we live a life that requires us to stay on the move, you can probably come back safely a couple of days from now. So, please, just go.”

Edgar subtly shifted his body so that he was between Landon and Maude. She knew he was planning something, but she didn’t know what.

She obviously couldn’t ask him. But, not wanting to endanger him, she stayed where she was and let Edgar play this out.

Edgar cleared his throat. “Captain Landon—”

“Last chance.”

Edgar moved so swiftly and fluidly, it caught Maude unaware. In one smooth motion, Edgar brought his gun up, but rather than shoot at Landon, he shot into the dirt at his horse’s hooves.

The horse whinnied loudly as it reared up on its hind legs. The movement took Landon off-guard and he went tumbling off its back.

His arms flailing, looking for purchase, he grabbed hold of the man next to him and they both sailed off their horses, hitting the ground with a hard thump.

Edgar was already in motion and he brought his rifle to bear, firing a quick shot into the man who’d shot Gregory.

His head snapped back, his eyes wide and a look of surprise on his face as he fell off the back of his horse, dead before he landed on the hard-packed earth.

The last man on his horse wasn’t looking at them; his eyes were fixed on the road that led to the farm.

Maude looked beyond him and saw several dozen men charging down the road on horseback—all of them armed, all of them looking ready to kill, their voices raised in wordless cries of rage.

“Captain!” the man on horseback shouted. “We’ve got to go. They’re coming.”

Landon was still groaning and trying to catch his breath when Jaws, Monty, and the rest of their posse thundered into the yard behind Sheriff Tompkins. Guns were leveled on Landon and his

men, who all put their hands up.

It was over. Landon and his men were being arrested.

Maude exchanged a look and a smile with Edgar, who looked stunned by the appearance of the men in their yard.

With joy in her heart, she watched as Landon and his men were shackled, doing her best to keep from screaming in jubilation.

Sheriff Tompkins walked over to them and shook both of their hands. Maude looked at him in amazement.

“How did you know he was here?” she asked.

“We’ve been watchin’ him, waiting for him to hit another farm,” he said.

“You two are braver than hell for standing up to him like you did. That you kept him talking so long gave us the time to get here.”

“I can’t thank you enough for riding in to the rescue,” Edgar said. “I am so relieved to see you.”

“Glad to help,” Tompkins replied. “Even more glad to have this guy out of our town.”

“That makes… well, a lot of us,” Maude said, and they all laughed.

“I’ll want you both to come down and make a formal statement soon. We’ll need it for the magistrate when they’re put on trial,” Tompkins added.

“We’ll come down tomorrow,” Maude said.

“I’d be obliged.”

They stood in the yard as the bound prisoners were put on horseback and the whole posse got moving.

Edgar wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She melted against him, both of them watching as the crowd of townspeople rode off, kicking up a massive cloud of dust behind them.

Edgar turned to her, his arms slipping around her waist. She laid the palms of her hands on his chest, staring up at him.

Edgar leaned down and planted a soft kiss on her lips. “I love you, Maude. You saved me.”

She laughed softly. “I think that posse saved the both of us.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. You helped save me from myself. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you for so long. I’m sorry I was so unbearable all this time,” he said.

“I’m not going to say everything is going to be perfect from here on out. There are still going to be challenges.

“But I have hope that it’s going to be better. That we’re going to be better. You saved me from myself, Maude. I love you.”

“And I love you. So much.”

Maude’s heart swelled and tears welled in her eyes. But these were tears of joy. She truly believed that things were going to be better.

She believed in him, and she believed in them. Maude held onto

the hope that they would both finally get the life and the love they both desired.

“We should probably go see to Gregory,” she said.

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“How do you know?”

He grinned at her. “I can hear him complaining from here.”

They laughed as they walked back toward the house, their hands linked together and love flowing through them both.

Epilogue

"It's a beautiful sunset," she said.

"It's not half as beautiful as you."

Maude looked over at Edgar and smiled. "You are such a charmer."

"It could just be that I'm hoping you'll take me to bed tonight."

She laughed and slapped him playfully on the shoulder, though she was thrilled the wall blocking them from enjoying physical contact with each other had crumbled to dust.

The intimacy between them was even stronger and more intense than she'd thought it would be. It was almost overwhelming to her. And yet, it made her insanely happy.

"Again?"

Edgar nodded. "Again."

"You have become insatiable."

"I blame you."

“Well, if you play your cards right, I may just indulge you.”

“Consider them played right.”

She laughed again as they walked, hand in hand, along the banks of the river. The sun was sinking below the horizon, casting the sky in fiery shades of red and orange.

It glimmered dazzlingly off the surface of the river, where a cool wind blew across the water. Winter would be coming soon, but the days were still temperate and beautiful.

Maude loved it.

A few months had passed since the showdown with Landon. Maude had kept up with the trial and had learned that Landon and his remaining men had been tried and convicted of thieving and murder.

They had been put to death by hanging a few weeks ago.

Maude wanted to feel sorry for them, but she thought they deserved what they’d gotten. Even if he had refused to let his men ravish her, Landon was a bad man and she was glad he was gone and they’d never have to think about him again.

She looked over at Edgar, still amazed by the complete turnaround he’d made. He still had the nightmares and moments of darkness, but they were becoming fewer and further between.

He seemed to have finally come out of that pit of despair he’d dwelled in for so long.

The death of Landon had seemed to further hearten him, but the

truth of the matter was, facing the captain down like he had finally helped him break free from the shackles of his past.

He often credited her for it, telling her that she had saved him. And Maude thought she might have helped a little bit.

But the fact of the matter, as she saw it, was that Edgar had saved himself.

It was, as Gregory had continued to tell him, that he'd finally made the choice to let go of the past. He'd made the choice to live in the present with Maude, and was making the choice to be happy.

He had continued to open up to her in the ensuing days and weeks. He'd shared his past with her, shared the stories of his humiliation and degradation at the hands of Captain Landon.

He told her everything and held nothing back. And, as he'd opened up to her, she could see that burden on his shoulders gradually lifting.

Speaking about it was letting sunlight into his heart. And she was glad for that.

He always said he was thankful for her, thankful that she had stayed with him. And thankful that she loved him. But she felt the same way.

Even in the deepest throes of his despair, she knew Edgar was a good man. She knew his heart and knew it was good.

Though she admitted it had been hard to hold onto that sometimes in the face of his darkness, she had persevered because she loved him fiercely.

She was thankful to him. He was a wonderful husband to her.

And maybe, one day, he'd be a good father to their children. They hadn't spoken about starting a family yet, but they would get there.

Now that Edgar was happy and back to his old self again, she was thinking more about it and had vowed to talk to him about it at some point in the near future.

"Are you happy here?" he asked.

She looked at him strangely. "Of course I am."

"Happy enough to make this your home for the rest of your life?"

She laughed, but was still confused. "Absolutely. I've really come to love it here. And you were right, Wellington Flats is growing quickly."

"Good. That's good. I'm glad you're happy here," he asked. "Did you ever think we'd be here? At this point with each other? In this town?"

"Honestly, there were days I had doubts," she admitted. "Things were difficult there for a little while."

He nodded. "And I'm sorry for that."

"You can stop saying you're sorry. There's no need to continue beating yourself up about it," she said.

"It's in the past and all I'm focused on is our future. Where is all of this coming from?"

He stopped and turned to her, taking her hands in his. Edgar looked into her eyes, his gaze so intense, it made her heart quiver.

She had no idea what was going through his mind at that point, but as she looked from him, to the river beside them, and then back to him again, she had a strange sense of déja vu.

She fondly recalled a time when they had stood on the banks of a river and had pledged their hearts to one another. Perhaps not in words, but in the fact that they were looking into each other's eyes —just like they were now.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

Edgar grinned and took one hand away, fishing around in his pocket. He pulled it out and dropped a key into her hand.

She looked at it, then back up at him, cocking her head, a curious smile on her lips.

"This is quite a step down from an opal pendant on the romance scale, you know," she said.

"You already had an opal, though, so…"

They both laughed together for a moment, but she looked down at the key in her hand again, her curiosity growing.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"It's for the new general store owner."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. "What?"

“Mr. Sunderland is retiring,” he explained. “He was just going to close his store, but I made him an offer to buy it.

“And I thought it might be a nice way for you to honor your parents… following in their footsteps and all.”

Tears sprang to her eyes and she threw her arms around him. Maude didn’t know what she’d done to deserve such happiness, or to deserve such a good man.

She slowly stepped back and gazed at the key in wonder. Finally, Maude looked back up at him, her lips quavering.

“Thank you, Edgar. You don’t know what this means to me,” she said. “And what it would have meant to my parents.”

“You deserve it, Maude. And I know you’re going to do an amazing job building up the store.”

She pulled him down into a long, languid kiss, trying to make him feel every ounce of the love she felt for him. Maude pulled back and looked him in the eye, tears still spilling down her cheeks, a smile upon her lips.

“You amaze me more every single day,” she said.

He grinned at her. “I’ve been saying that every day since we were young.”

“Such a charmer.”

“Sometimes.”

She smiled. “I love you, Edgar. I love you so much.”

“And I love you,” he replied and flashed her a mischievous grin. “So? Did I play my cards right?”

Maude laughed and together they turned and walked along the bank of the river.

Extended Epilogue

I am so happy you finished reading the **A Strong Bride to Mend a Soldier's Heart**, till the end!

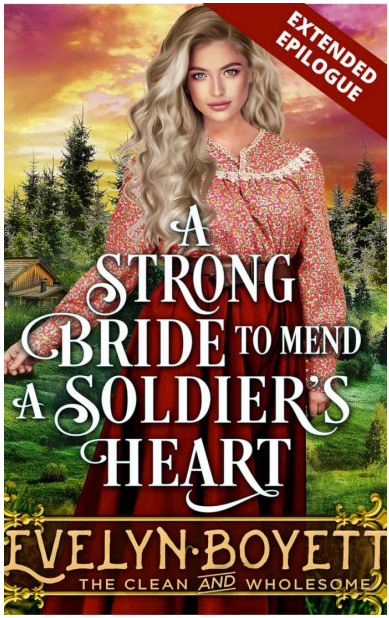
Are you aching to know what happens to our lovely couple?

Will Maude and Edgar make the family they've always wanted?

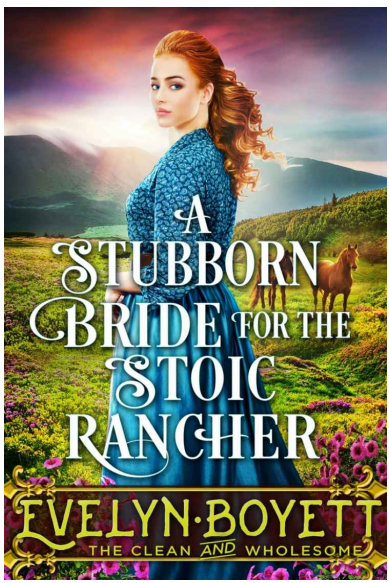
What will Maude and Edgar do now that the nightmare is over?

Will Edgar have to choose between the love of his life and his true destiny?

Click on the picture or on the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a BONUS, **I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!**


EXTENDED EPILOGUE
A STRONG BRIDE TO MEND A SOLDIER'S HEART
EVELYN·BOYETT
THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

A Stubborn Bride For The Stoic Rancher



Chapter 1

The scrubland stretched out before him and his eyes squinted in the bright sunlight. It was unbearably hot, but that heat protected the unearthly beauty of a place like this, and that meant something to a man like him.

He felt like a protector of the hidden places in the world, the places most people would just pass by without any inkling of their true value.

He smiled, spurring his horse on toward the horizon. He didn't have long to finish up the job that needed doing. The cows would wait for no man to get stuck in the heavenly beauty of the American West.

There was some technical term for the landscape, but he didn't remember it. The beauty didn't care what it was named, either.

Wyoming was a harsh place, built by the kind of people that had spent their entire lives working impossibly hard to get things done for very little recognition.

He would never trade off what he had experienced on this land.

He had been born on this land, and he knew that he would die

here. This was his family legacy. It was just a shame that there were so few of his family left.

“Hup.” He directed the horse to ride around the herd of cattle, then called out for the dogs to assist in the gentle steering of the livestock.

“Easy now.” He slowed the pace, working with expert precision.

They were well-practiced at the art, having worked together countless times before.

His brother used to help with this work, but that was a long time ago—at least, it felt like a long time ago even if it hadn’t been more than a year.

Exhaustion sagged as he got the cows into the fenced pasture where they could go into the barn if they chose to, but he still had more to do. One more calf to wrangle, as he liked to put it.

The most important calf of all.

“Why don’t you go home?” He turned to the ranch hand that was working with him. They lived in the bunkhouse on the property, helping with the cattle.

Lyle took off his gloves. “Want Cookie to put some food aside for you?”

“I would appreciate that.” Jasper nodded.

“Reckon he’d do it even if I didn’t ask him.”

The rancher laughed. “He probably would. I’ve got to get on the

way, though. Daisy should get to bed soon, and I've got to go get her."

"Etta's a sweet woman; sure nice of her to help out like this."

"It is, I can't tell you how much help it's been." Jasper turned and sauntered over to the cart so that he could get it ready to go.

He rode down the road. It was over a mile to the closest neighbor, but it was a ride he took twice a day after he stopped to strap the cart up to the mule.

On his way, he found himself pondering over the wilderness once again.

The city was over a day's ride away, so the only people this far out were the kind of folks who wanted to be out here. He was one of those people, even if it would be easier to live in a city some days. He wanted to work this land.

And he knew he would miss all of this if he moved to the city. He wanted this life, he loved the open fields and the cattle and the hard work that he had always known.

He loved having the fresh air to breathe and the space to stretch out over the land. And he couldn't lose that. So, he would keep doing this as long as he possibly could.

When he arrived, he was greeted by an older woman. She had a smile on her face as she waved him down.

He pulled his cart up to the front of the house and tied the mule to a post that was stuck in the ground. "Evenin'."

“Evenin’.” She nodded at him. “You look tired. You eat yet?”

“Not yet.” He smiled. “Cookie is working on dinner for all the boys. I’ll eat when I get home.”

“Nonsense. We’ve got dinner inside. Come eat with us.”

“You sure? I’d hate to put you out.”

“You never put us out.”

“Thank you. Where’s Daisy?”

“She’s inside. Just looking at the fire again.” Etta frowned.

Jasper sighed. “I’m sorry, I just don’t know what to do about this.”

“Daisy is always a pleasure to watch.” The older woman shook her head. “You don’t have to worry about it. I know it’s just a hard time for her right now.”

“A hard time seems to be an understatement.” Jasper shook his head. “I wish I could help her.”

“She just lost her mother. It’ll take some time for you to get everything together. Children need to know what to expect out of life.

“And you’re just figuring everything out,” Etta reminded him. “That’s going to take time, but it will get easier.”

“I don’t feel like it’s going to get any easier.”

“No new parent ever does.”

He tried to find comfort in her words but didn't know if he could. "Thank you for watching her." Jasper stepped up on the porch and removed his hat.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate it," he added.

"You don't have to thank me. I missed having children around." The older woman ushered both of them back inside.

"Come have some dinner. We've already eaten, but we have some put aside for you."

"You do this so often, and you don't have to."

"You provide far more food than she eats, don't worry about this at all. This is just the extra food that she doesn't eat."

He sat down at the table and Etta quickly brought him a plate. The food was still piping hot. She must have kept it placed close to the fire so that he could eat a hot meal.

This was indeed a special thing that he was certain he would never find in the city. The neighborly friendship that grew when you had to count on each other because help was a long way away.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," she tutted at him. "Don't worry about this. I don't mind making sure you get food."

Daisy stayed on the floor of the sitting room. She had a few wooden toys and a small doll that she was quietly making dance around.

He smiled at her until Etta interrupted his thoughts. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

The old man moved out of the front room to come and sit at the table with Jasper. “Jasper.” The man had a serious look on his face.

“Is there something wrong?” Jasper carefully examined the other man’s face. Something was bothering him.

“You look tired.”

“I am tired.” Jasper pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his lips in between bites. “It was a hard day on the ranch.”

“You looked so tired this morning, as well.” Etta wrung her hands.

“I know. I didn’t sleep well.”

She shook her head.“You never seem to be sleeping well.”

Jasper sighed. “I know, but there’s not much that I can do about it.”

“Have you considered taking a wife?” Etta spoke slowly, testing the air with her suggestion.

Jasper fell silent. The food he had already eaten felt heavy in his stomach.

“I know it’s a hard thing to think about.” Etta frowned deeply.

“I don’t know.” Jasper paused. “I don’t think I want anything like that.”

“You can’t just be a bachelor forever.”

“Plenty of men are.”

Etta shook her head. “You’ve got that little girl. She needs a woman in her life, someone to teach her what it’s like to grow up into a young woman.”

Jasper sighed. “I suppose I can think about it.”

“We won’t stop watching her. You never have to worry about that. We love the girl as if she was one of our own, but it’s clear that you need help at the ranch.

“Running it all by yourself with just a single ranch hand is going to be the death of you,” she pointed out.

“Yes, I know.” Jasper hung his head. He wanted nothing more than to walk away from this entire conversation, but Etta had a point.

They cared about him and they cared about Daisy. They wanted him to take care of himself, and having someone there at the house would help him maintain the ranch.

Someone who could watch Daisy when he was out working the fields so that he didn’t have to take these trips as often.

He sighed and looked out the window.

Etta reached across the table and patted the back of his hand. “Why don’t you just get some food in you before you head back

home."

"I will." He smiled.

She walked into the kitchen and he kept working on the hot home-cooked meal. It felt good to have good cooking in his stomach.

He wasn't much of a cook himself. Before, his sister-in-law had been doing the cooking in the house while she was home with Daisy.

But those days were in the past. It would never happen again.

Now, he was the only one left to raise the little girl that his brother had loved so dearly. They had died, their lives robbed when a wagon they were taking to town was attacked by bandits on the road.

The grief had been unbearable, but he had never given it a chance to take hold. He had far too much to do with his life.

Daisy needed him. She needed the stability that her family could offer her. She needed to know that she was loved.

He knew that it was the way through the pain that they both felt. But the truth was that Daisy had become a withdrawn child, losing the brightness that had made the world a better place.

People had suggested that he give Daisy off to another family, to let them raise her, but he could never let that happen. Daisy had been raised on that land, and she was entitled to live there for the rest of her life.

He wasn't going to take that away from her. And there were days

like today when it was all worth it. Days when he could see her brightness again.

He loved the little girl and she had known more pain than any child ever should. He was her family; he was going to do whatever it took to give her what she needed.

Etta came out of the kitchen a few minutes later with a pail.

“What’s this?” Jasper asked.

“I don’t think you’ve been eating lunch lately. I packed you one.”

“Cookie makes lunch for us.” Jasper shook his head.

“Not a good lunch,” she countered.

He laughed. Cookie wasn’t known for his skills in the kitchen, but he was willing to do the job and did make sure that there was enough food for everyone. That was as good as anyone could ask of a man who had taken over the job suddenly with no experience.

It was the best they had been able to do in the moment, and there simply hadn’t been time to rectify the situation. That meant the ranch hands had eaten a lot of beans and cornbread, because that was the only thing Cookie made that was still edible.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t.” She waved him off. “I don’t mind helping you out.

“A young man like you, just doing the best you can for your family. That girl couldn’t ask for anyone better to raise her.”

That made Jasper smile. “I can’t thank you enough for how much you’ve helped me out. I know that it’s not an ideal situation.”

“It’s the least we can do,” Edgar spoke up. The man was far more soft-spoken than his wife. “You’re doing the best that you can.”

Jasper finished eating and stood up. “I should get her home.”

“How about you bring clothes for her tomorrow and she can spend a night or two over here so you can get more rest.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Etta nodded.

Edgar nodded. “She has a lot of fun over here, I’m sure she’ll love it. We’ll make a bed for her on the floor and she can camp in the living room.”

Jasper smiled. “Thank you again.” He got back up before they could argue with him again. He picked up the lunch pail and walked over to where his niece was sitting.

She looked up at him. “Are we leaving?”

“We’re leaving, little lady. Ready to get home?”

“Yes!” She jumped up and leaped into his arms.

Chapter 2

Georgia straightened the pretty gray fabric of her skirts. There were tiny flowers embroidered on the cloth, vines twining between all the different colors.

It was her favorite dress, one that she had lovingly cared for over the past few years. She knew it would be a very long time until another dress like this came into her life.

Embroidery like that took a long time, and a lot of brightly-colored threads. That made it much more expensive than she could afford.

But it was her favorite dress, one that she only wore on special occasions, and this was the most auspicious of occasions. Her sister was going to be married.

The ceremony unfolded onto the front lawn, with Mary standing in her location of honor on the porch. The preacher spoke, his voice monotonous as he incanted the rituals of wedlock.

A tear fell from Georgia's eye. This was a moment full of joy, but she couldn't help but feel the pain of her own lonely heart.

Her sister had always been the one she had shared her life with. The one who had shared her burdens. But after this day, it simply

wouldn't be the same.

She would be alone to care for her ailing mother through the hard times.

She was happy for her older sister. If she kept saying it to herself, she could remind herself of the fact that this was a joyous day, one that deserved celebration.

The troubles of the world would just have to wait. She would have to figure out everything else later.

The preacher kept speaking. "The bonds of love are bonds that cannot be broken. No matter how the world seeks to stop it, they will keep one in the heart and hands of God above."

The words made her smile. That was the truth. Her sister glanced in her direction.

Georgia smiled at her older sister, not letting Mary know about what was troubling her mind to the point of nearly drowning out the ceremony.

"It is my great hope that the two of you know the happiness that you cannot deny."

Georgia nodded for her sister to face the preacher once again.

She didn't need to be the center of Mary's attention. Mary deserved her happiness even if it reminded Georgia of the failings in her own life.

The older Hester sister turned back to the preacher.

This caused Georgia to follow her sister's lead and turn her attention back to the ceremony. In her spot as the maid of honor, she could see the entire crowd.

All their friends and neighbors were there, enjoying the happy occasion.

The tables to the side were already loaded down with food, a dish from every guest. It would be a good meal for everyone, a veritable feast that would stretch on for hours once the ceremony ended.

This wasn't one of the fancy weddings that Georgia would read about in the social pages of the broadsheets.

It was a small affair that took advantage of the sweet summer air and the property that her family had lived on for three generations as the city had grown up around them.

The exchanging of rings drew Georgia's attention away from her thoughts. This was her time to shine.

The final moments of the ceremony were just as sweet as the rest of it. She slipped the ribbon from around her neck, carefully untying the knot in the silky fabric.

She handed the ring to her sister and then stepped back into her position, standing in a shaded part of the porch so she didn't stand in the way of anyone's view of the two lovers becoming a family in the center of the stage.

Nobody wanted to sit on the hard benches in the humid Virginia summer forever, so they had planned to have a short ceremony. It was still a nice ceremony, simple and pure.

Georgia appreciated the flowing words that the preacher had spoken.

When the pomp and circumstance was finally over, Georgia let out a heavy breath. She was more than ready to keep fading into the background, slipping off to the side while everyone congratulated the happy couple.

The preacher was basking in the praise of a beautiful ceremony and her mother was entertaining the crowd with stories of the eldest Hester child.

That left Georgia to gather herself a plate of food and find a place to sit away from the crowds. That was one of the things she hated about living in a city—she never felt like there was enough room to be able to stretch out her elbows.

She rarely shared those thoughts anymore. Those were the dreams of a child who didn't have responsibility.

Georgia sipped some coffee, enjoying the heat as it slipped past her lips. It was too hot for coffee, but she didn't care.

She enjoyed the bitter drink, it made her feel stronger with each sip. It was comforting, reminding her of her father and the way he used to drink the strong liquid.

"Georgie?" her sister's voice rang out, using the nickname that she had carried since she was a child.

"Aren't you supposed to be enjoying your party?" Georgia didn't look up at her sister, hoping the young woman would just slip away back into the crowd and forget about the sister troubled by thoughts that didn't belong in the celebration.

“I can’t enjoy a party when my baby sister is over here pouting.”

Georgia finally looked up as her sister approached. “I just needed to step out of the crowd. I’m not pouting.”

“I can see your face,” the elder Hester sister scolded Georgia.

Georgia frowned. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. Something is on your mind. Come on, tell me what it is.”

“It’s nothing.” Georgia shook her head.

She should have known that her older sister could read her like a book. She wasn’t going to get away with that excuse. “Talk to me.”

“You just got married. You shouldn’t worry about me. I’m just getting lost in my thoughts again.”

Mary Hester sighed heavily. “You don’t honestly expect me to believe that, do you?”

“You could. It would be a lot easier for everyone.”

“Are you worried about something?”

“No.” Georgia knew that her older sister would see right through the lie she had just told. But she didn’t want to have this conversation.

There were much better things to be talking about. “Are you ready to move, yet?”

“I’ve been ready for days, you helped me pack.”

“Right, forgot about that.”

“Or you were just trying to distract me.”

“Why would I want to distract you?” Georgia feigned innocence.

Mary’s eyes narrowed. “Do you remember when you used to dream about seeing the great wild west?”

The question took Georgia by surprise. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I was just thinking about you.”

“You know that I can’t go.” She shook her head. “It’s not that easy. I can’t just leave to go west. That was the dream of a child, and I can’t be a child anymore.”

“Why can’t you go?”

“Because I have to take care of Mother.” Her voice cracked.

“You don’t have to stay here and take care of her. We both love Mother, but you shouldn’t give up every single dream that you ever had for her.”

“It’s not that simple.” Georgia shook her head. “I would be a woman alone, heading west. Nothing good ever comes of those stories.”

“Something good could come of it. There may be a way for you to do it.”

“What the blazes are you going on about? Have you been drinking already?”

“A little bit, but that doesn’t matter. I’ve been thinking about it. There’s a way for you to go and see the world, and you would be safe doing it.

“You could see the wide-open spaces and finally be able to air out your soul,” Mary promised.

“My soul doesn’t need airing out,” Georgia scoffed.

“That’s not what you said.” Mary’s eyes sparkled as she teased her baby sister.

Georgia wasn’t a fan of being beaten by her sister in a verbal spar, but it had become a normal part of their life. “That was a long time ago. We were children.”

“I know that you still want to.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just a feeling.” The older sister shrugged.

“You can’t just accuse someone of something like that and then say that it’s just a feeling,” Georgia countered.

“I’ve been doing it for years.” Mary laughed.

“You’re just poking fun now.”

“It’s my wedding day.”

“And that’s the only reason I’m letting this stand.” Georgia slipped in the language of the heroes from the novels she had grown up reading.

They were books about the west, exploring rugged terrain and having the freedom that only large tracts of empty land could give to a person. It was a freedom of the soul that she had been dreaming about since she was a child.

“What were you thinking?”

“Well, there’s a lot of bachelors out west. And they’ve got the land. But what they don’t have are wives.” Her sister’s voice had a conspiratorial tone.

Georgia laughed. “Are you suggesting that?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a chance for you to go and live your dreams.”

“My dreams have changed since then.”

“Not that much.” Mary shook her head. “I know you aren’t happy in this life.”

“I’m happy enough.” Georgia didn’t want to admit that her sister was right. “And those kinds of dreams are for kids.”

“Or for explorers.”

“I’m not an explorer.”

“But you could be.” Hope was dripping on every single word Mary said.

The woman was incorrigible when she got an idea like this, sticking to it and eventually convincing everyone to go along with whatever she was scheming.

“That’s a dangerous proposition.” Georgia shook her head. As much as she wanted to believe in what her sister was saying, she knew that it just wasn’t possible.

A certain amount of guilt bubbled up even being tempted by the idea. It made her feel like the world was crumbling around her.

“You’re joking, aren’t you? Do you have any idea how many parts of that plan could go wrong? You never know who you’re talking to.”

“We can ask the right questions.”

“We?”

Mary grinned at Georgia.

It was the same look the eldest Hester sibling had always gotten whenever she was planning an adventure for the pair to take on, not something that Georgia expected. The time for those types of adventures had long since passed.

“You think I’m going to let you do it by yourself?”

Georgia shook her head. “I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got responsibilities here,” Georgia explained again. Her sister knew that this was just one of the wild dreams that they had shared when they were young.

It would never come to fruition. There was simply no way she could do it with the way her world was. There was only one daughter left to care for their mother.

“Mother wouldn’t stop you.”

“She can’t live without help.”

Mary lost her smile. “We would find a way to solve this problem, too. We’ve solved every problem. You can live a life that you want to.”

“Stop making promises you can’t keep. This isn’t possible.” Georgia shook her head. “I don’t want to go. I can’t go.

“Maybe someday I’ll go west, but for now, I’m happy here.”

That was a lie. Georgia wanted to go more than anything, but her family was important. The family needed her.

She couldn’t just run off and chase rainbows into the wilderness until she lost herself in the wide-open spaces of the American West.

Mary got up. “At least take some time to think about it. There are ways, if you ever decide to go.”

“Thank you,” Georgia whispered as her sister walked away.

Although Mary did not verbally acknowledge her younger sister’s honest gratitude, she did give a slight nod of her head before

heading back into the celebration of her love.

That left Georgia alone once again. Her sister's words made her wonder about what the future could hold if she took such a risk.

It was a dangerous proposition, that was true, but there was a dream there. That was something that she could hold onto.

A dream was a powerful thing, even if it never really came true.

But that was all that she would ever do. Spring Valley was her home.

She lived in the great state of Virginia, a place steeped in history that had long been the cradle of civilization in the country.

The west was wild and untamed, uncontrolled.

It was a curse of her birth that she had been born in this part of the country. But her birth was not a thing that she could change.

The truth was that she didn't even know if she could survive without the luxuries that her life currently afforded her. It wasn't much, but it was a comfortable life.

They weren't a wealthy family, but they had love. That was what was most important, but it was nice that they did not toil in impossibly hard work from before dawn until the sun had long since sunk below the horizon.

She stood up and looked toward the party.

Then, she stepped back. Music was playing. They were dancing.

It would be good to enjoy herself instead of wallowing in her thoughts about possibilities that simply weren't possible. She would simply have to enjoy the vivid vistas her mind conjured up in the dead of night, instead.

If you enjoyed reading the first couple of chapters, you can continue reading here.